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ABSTRACT

This thesis examined the experiences of three mothers who were volunteers in an alternative special education class of kindergarten through fourth graders at a Canadian public school. This class was organized at the behest of parents who wanted more involvement in their children's education. The study sought to answer, through a series of interviews, the following questions about the three mothers who became very active in the class: (1) How did these women view the school setting? (2) How did the women deal with their children's education? (3) What motivated these women to volunteer? (4) How did the women interact in the classroom with their own children, other children, and the teacher? and (5) What personal growth had each of the women observed in themselves and how had it affected their lives? It was found that the mothers had certain characteristics in common, including strong reasons for stepping outside of the mainstream and volunteering, and a tendency to leave or reduce their involvement in the program after several years. It was also discovered that participation in the alternative class enlarged these women's view of education and allowed them to satisfy a need to make contact with other people concerned with their children's education. An excerpt from an interview is appended. (Contains 18 references.) (MDM)

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PERSONAL GROWTH AMONG PARENT VOLUNTEERS IN AN ALTERNATIVE CLASS

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements for the
degree of Master of Education

Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

May, 1992

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Abstract

As a part of enroling their children in an Alternative Class in Centreville parents were expected to volunteer some time to the class, either in the classroom or on committees in the evenings. This study looks at three women who were highly involved in both.

This particular Kindergarten to Grade 4 class was formed by a group of parents looking for more involvement in their children's education. As such, the organizational structures of the class encouraged parents to become active participants.

The parents in the study had certain characteristics in common. Firstly, there was a strong reason for stepping outside the mainstream. Secondly, they tended to either leave or reduce their commitment after a few years. Thirdly, volunteers seemed to go through a series of personal changes over time. Through a sequence of interviews the study examines what there was in the class to attract intensive volunteering and what unique qualities were present in the class which encouraged and allowed for personal growth to take place.

The study has implications for educational research and educational practice. The parent-school reciprocal relationship was revealed by using an ethnographic and narrative research approach. The personal growth disclosed

in the interviews developed out of complex relationships between parents and the institution, relationships which were encouraged by the innovations present in the Alternative Class.

Acknowledgements

My greatest thanks goes to my wife who struggled through this with me saying, "Just get it done" when that was what I needed to hear. An enormous thank-you to Prof. Arlene Stairs, my Thesis Supervisor, for her many hours of meeting with me, reading my efforts, advising where I needed it, whether I knew it or not, and walking me through the whole thing. Thanks too to Prof. Barb Mansfield for holding my hand through my first ever interview and analysis. Thank you to Prof. Bill Peruniak for convincing me that I could do it at all and for being on my committee. To Prof. Bert Horwood, thank-you for taking the time to be a committee member. And to June Rogers, fellow teacher and friend, thank-you for the time and care taken to edit this final edition.

Lastly, and most importantly, to the three women, mothers of my students, who gave of their time, their wisdom, and their inner lives to allow me to do this work, a very humble and grateful thanks.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND PERSPECTIVE

Purpose.....3

Organization of the Thesis.....4

Context of the Study.....4

Background on the Class.....4

Operating Structures of the Class.....6

Parents' Meetings.....7

Ownership by Parents.....9

Choosing the Perspective.....12

Significance and Limitations of the Study.....24

Significance.....24

Limitations.....25

Chapter 2

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....28

Procedure.....29

Participants.....33

Analysis of the Data.....34

Chapter 3

RESULTS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS.....36

The Women.....36

Thematic Categories.....42

More Active/Less Traditional.....43
Without Realizing You're Doing It.....49
Connectedness.....52
Being There For Your Own And Others' Children..62
Ownership By Parents.....67
Community.....71
Communication.....77
Parent to Parent Communication.....78
Parent to Child Communication.....80
Parent to Teacher Communication.....83
Child to Teacher Communication.....84
Child to Child Communication.....85
The Teacher Assistant Role.....88
If It Doesn't Work.....94
Affirmation.....95
Change.....110
Change of Circumstances.....110
Change in One's View of Oneself.....111
Change in the View of One's Children.....114
Change in How One Acts in the World.....115
Change in Roles.....116
Change in One's View of Education.....117
Change in One's View of Children
and Conflict.....118
Summary.....120

Chapter 4

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....122

Discussion.....122

Implications.....127

Concluding Remarks.....130

References.....132

Appendix.....136

VITA.....141

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND PERSPECTIVE

For four years I was the teacher of an Alternative Class and had daily contact with parent volunteers who were mostly women. It seemed to me that they not only adjusted to the climate of the classroom but that they seemed to go through a change in their attitudes toward the class, toward the students, toward teachers in general, and toward the education system at large. Somehow, the interactions that took place between themselves and their children, between themselves and the school system, and between themselves and other parents produced a kind of confidence and focus that they did not have when they entered the class.

I was seeing this from the outside and did not have any real sense of the process they had undergone despite becoming very good friends with some of the parents. At times I attributed the changes to familiarity with the class and to the way they redefined their views of school as something different from what they had experienced as children. I began to wonder what it was that drew a mother into the classroom to spend a half a day or more a week in an unpaid job with 25 children, only one or two of whom were her own. It did not make immediate sense to me that the attraction should be extremely strong for about ten members of the

parent body, while the other 15 or so families showed little interest in actually being in the classroom. Obviously there was something special and unique about the women who were such regular volunteers year after year.

I also wondered why it was that classroom volunteers would lose interest after a couple of years, and deep concern for the welfare of the class would disappear. There seemed to be more to it than they became tired as it seemed to happen in unique ways for each of the women involved. I decided to concentrate my study on several mothers because so few of my volunteers were fathers and they never proved to be as regularly involved as the women. What was occurring seemed uniquely female as far as my classroom was concerned. For that reason I began to read feminist writers such as Carol Gilligan and Mary Field Belenky.

As I began the study, it became apparent that the change in attitude which had caught my interest seemed to involve a shift on a perceptual level. The women were interpreting the world differently. They had undergone some deep personal changes. The focus of my study became what those changes were, what place the classroom setting had in affecting them, and how their personal growth was expressed by each of the women. I found I was looking at volunteerism from the point of view of what the volunteer had to gain rather than either what the school as an institution gained or how the presence of volunteers influenced the students. I was examining the

volunteers' experience.

Purpose

The immediate purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of three women who were volunteers on a weekly basis for a period of a year or more in the Alternative Class. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. How did these women view the school setting?
2. How were these women dealing with the issue of their children's education in the present context, whether that was continuation in the Alternative Class or entry into the mainstream?
3. What motivated these women to volunteer significant amounts of their time to their children's schooling?
4. What happened for women in the classroom in their interactions with their own children, other people's children, other parents and myself as the teacher?
5. During their involvement with the Alternative Class what personal growth had each of the women observed in themselves and how had it affected their lives?

Organization of the Thesis

In the rest of Chapter 1, I will present the process by which I came to focus on this study. The literature review is a naturally integrated part of that process. Also included is a brief look at the uniqueness of the Alternative Class setting.

Chapter 2 outlines the design of the study, the participants, the study methods and analysis.

Chapter 3 presents the content, themes and analysis of the interviews.

Chapter 4 summarizes the material of the previous chapters and examines the implications of the study.

Context of the Study

Background on the Class

The Alternative Class was established in May 1985 when the Board of Education agreed to run an Alternative Class, spanning Senior Kindergarten to Grade 4, as a pilot project. This culminated a four-year effort by a group of local parents who had repeatedly approached the Board for space and a teacher for a class which was child-centered and involved parents in its everyday operations. Negotiations were required between the expectations of the parents for a program more informal than in traditional classrooms with high parental involvement and the expectations of the Board

for programming meeting the requirements of the Ministry of Education and County Curriculum.

The class was located in the basement of an older downtown public school. The significance of this was that most school bus routes passed nearby. Although the Board would not provide for busing of students to the Alternative Class they did agree to let students occupy available seats if the bus was passing near the student's home. In all but a few cases, it was possible for students who lived on the other side of the city, or even out of town, to make bus connections in the morning and at the end of the day. A problem arose for Kindergarten students who lived outside the city since buses in the country run only in the morning and country schools have Kindergarten all day on alternate days. We tried to work out the logistics of transportation with the result that some parents left the program and others drove their children in every day.

As the teacher chosen for the class, I called a parents' meeting early in the summer to meet all the families involved. It was immediately apparent to me that enormous energy was available for almost any project. I was expected to provide a sense of direction. Parents had a genuine concern for the form their children's education was to take and for how the class was to be organized. Their concerns were fuelled by an idealism that reached for a more humane system and by an expressed desire that their children not

have the same "bad" experiences in school that they remembered.

Operating Structures of the Class

The operating structures of the class had evolved year by year as both parents and students changed. There were perennial concerns that cropped up. The parents were required to recruit a minimum of twenty-five students each year to continue operations. Many parents worried that perhaps the class was not right for their child and that the regular stream might be a better choice. Concern was expressed that the extra responsibilities of parent meetings and a multi-grade class might exhaust the teacher and the energetic parents who were needed to help run the class. Everyone wondered what the Board of Education was going to do about any issue that came up. Conversely, there was great pride in what the group had created and real commitment to being part of something different. Uncertainty, enthusiasm, conflict and humour were a part of every parents' meeting.

The Board explicitly stated that no one could be excluded from enroling their child in the class. Nor could we put conditions on the child's enrolment. Similarly, no conditions could be put on parents' involvement. Still, there was an unwritten expectation that a member of each family would either serve on an evening committee or volunteer in the classroom. Everyone was encouraged to

attend the monthly Parents' Meetings or phone in their reason for not being present. These expectations were not always realized and there was no method of enforcing them as in some other alternative classes where parents are asked to withdraw their children if they did not put in some volunteer time.

The philosophy of the class stressed play as an important element in children's learning. The theory behind play is expressed in the curriculum resource document, Education in the Primary and Junior Divisions. With regard to play , the document explains that, "it is free from the restrictions of reality, external evaluations, and judgement. Children can try out different styles of action and communication without being required to make premature decisions or being penalized for errors" (Ministry of Education, 1975, p. 15).

Parents' Meetings

Parents' meetings, which involved all parents, were held once a month. Smaller committees met whenever necessary. If parents could not take part in the daily running of the class then they were expected be on some committee to support the class. There were a few families who did not participate at all and that created some hard feelings. Since the Board had made it clear that the parent group could not set conditions deciding who could or could not be in the class, the parents who were actively involved could only suggest and encourage others to become active as well. Committees were formed to

raise funds, recruit new students for the following year, provide an executive, telephone to organize fieldtrips, organize social gatherings, and address other issues as they arose. Much of the uniqueness of the class came from the work that the parents on these various committees did on their own with follow-up information provided for the larger group. In The Open Partnership: Equality in Running Schools, Ryan (1976) refers to the synergy of this kind of coming together to share responsibility.

> Few of us know individually what can or should be done in a situation of any complexity, but if we come together we can talk through a problem and arrive at a better solution than any of us could have discovered separately. (p. 17)

The monthly meeting of parents developed a regular format. Often there was a guest speaker who was either a teacher or member of the Support Team from the Board offices, who spoke on computers, the reading program, the writing process, drama, hands-on mathematics, co-operative learning, or some other area of parent interest. Then reports from various committees would be heard and new business would be discussed. New business might include a family pot-luck dinner in the fall, a Christmas party for parents and students at someone's home, the spring camping trip, or a fund raiser. It was always a busy two hours. After the meeting some of the parents would gather at a local pub for a

drink and some lighter conversation. Those times were also important social gatherings.

Ownership by Parents

All of what has been discussed to this point could be classified as Parent Teacher Aassociation style interaction between parents and school, an arm's length interaction from which parents do not directly influence what takes place in the classroom. But a more hands-on contribution by parents developed out of a committee experiment. A few parents who could find time during lunch hour met with me once a month to work on curriculum. These meetings eventually grew in importance until they were part of the monthly parents' meetings, usually the last thirty or forty minutes. In that way all the parents had access to the process. It worked in the following manner. I, as the teacher, made decisions as to which area of the curriculum the class would be working on for the next month. Using the format of a brainstorming session, the group generated ideas for implementing that particular part of the curriculum. Suggestions often ranged from a guest speaker, a fieldtrip, a parent with a particular skill coming into the classroom to work on a project, to simply a list of ideas that could be used in the classroom. It was a stimulating, energy-filled planning time. Individuals would then take responsibility for following up on particular suggestions such as contacting a guest speaker,

gathering art materials, or teaching a particular skill to small groups of students. Parents were actively involved in the curriculum as participants. They made decisions about what their children were learning.

There were parents who could only work on evening committees and others who came in only to work on special projects such as Christmas crafts with the class. The backbone of parent involvement, however, was the group of parents, usually mothers, who volunteered half a day a week in the classroom week after week, sometimes for years. It was with the parents in this group that I had the most contact and with whom I become friends over the months we spent together. They read with the children, helped run activity centres, led drama groups, and were right there when there was a conflict in the classroom. They provided transportation for fieldtrips and participated in all the projects. These front-line parents were there to see the results of their curriculum planning and had a feeling for the class that the others who only came in once in a while, if at all, could not possibly imagine. It is this latter group of parents that I decided to study.

By re-organizing curriculum planning structures, Alternative Class parents were included in the decision making of how the curriculum was delivered. This reflected a move toward valuing parents as an integral part of their children's education while validating parents' concerns about

what and how their children are learning. Both parents and myself benefitted from a dialogue about learning. I was able to hear the parents' anxieties, and the parents were able to understand some of what went on in the classroom and to become participating members of the class even if they were not able to volunteer time in the classroom itself.

My own change in attitude toward the parents meetings is reflected in this excerpt from Newmark's book This School Belongs To You And Me (1976):

> The first few meetings I dreaded because I was tired and didn't look forward to going back to school in the evening. I accepted because I thought it was important and would benefit the children. After the fourth meeting my attitude changed. Instead of dreading coming back to school, I actually looked forward to it.
>
> This feeling, I know through talking with parents, was felt by them also...After each meeting, going home, I would always have a feeling of elation--that I had done something important--but most of all that the school meetings could be fun and still accomplish something. (p. 218)

Choosing the Perspective

There has been significant work done on the impact that parents' involvement in the school has on students, particularly students whose parents work one-to-one with them on reading and mathematics skills (Becher, 1984; Nebor, 1986; Rasinski, 1988) and on acquiring second-language skills (Ada, 1988; Orum, 1988). In many ways, the standard by which the success of any parent-school program is measured is in terms of the amount of gain by the students. This creates understandable bias in view of the educator's perceived responsibility for children's learning.

There is also ample evidence to show that improving the school-parent relationship creates a more positive image for teachers, parents and for students (Green, 1987; Gotts, 1984; Hart, 1988; Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ontario, 1989). These studies look at public relations aspects of Home and School and other programs that bring parents into the school as assistants in other than direct teaching roles. Much of what passes for parents' involvement in schools is in reality something other than being involved with the students. Examples are preparing cookies for the school, supervising bake sales, preparing costumes for the Christmas play, coming out to evening meetings, and other events which do not include interaction with children. Such examples of parent involvement provide

an opportunity for the school to appear in a favourable light in the community and provide a forum for meetings between parent and school on a positive day-to-day basis. There is nothing wrong with a public relations approach. It enhances a school's credibility within the community and avoids the perception of secrets' being kept out of sight of parents. It is to a school's advantage to have volunteers of every sort where staff, students, and parents interact. What is missing in this kind of parent involvement is pointed out most clearly in Listening to Parents (Atkin, Bastiani, & Goode, 1988).

> For parents the last decade has seen a slow but unspectacular progress in combating the notion that their children's education was 'not really any of their business' or that their contact with their children's schools should be very limited, except as fund-raisers or extra pairs of hands in an emergency. (p. 4) [Authors' emphasis.]

The current expression "partnership" that is being heard in staff meetings and at in-service training sessions clearly defines the partners from the educator's perspective. That is, it is either the educator or the student who gains. The educator directs the interaction and defines the value of the interaction through perceived benefits to the student's education. What outside partners gain is left to those agents to discover for themselves. What took place in the

Alternative Class, I believe, can be more clearly defined by Janet Atkin (1988) in her use of the term "joint partnership" Atkin contends that:

> Still further along this route [of parent involvement in the school] though very much within practical reach, is the style characterised by joint partnership, which acknowledges not only the right but the value of parents taking a full and active part in their children's education and development, on equal terms, albeit in different ways. (p. 107) [author's emphasis.]

Having acknowledged the value of parents' participation in the process of educating their children and having committed myself to providing strategies for that involvement to take place, I had to ask myself the question, to what end? What is it that parents gain from such involvement? From my perspective as a teacher, it was easy to see what I gained, and easy to see what the students gained. I could not, however, answer the question of what parents gained by getting involved with their school. Why have parents continued to exert a steady pressure upon schools and the system? What is it that parents feel in the classroom that brings them back week after week? After all, in an age of specialization, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with leaving education to experts who have the proper qualifications and who have the best interests of their

students at heart. I had to begin to view the class through parents' eyes in order to get a sense of what was happening for them in that room.

This thesis examined those aspects of one particular classroom which attracted parent volunteers and what the volunteers believed they gained from their participation in the education process. This is a unique view of volunteerism, one which the literature has neglected. At a time when large numbers of people are out of work, volunteer organizations are seeing an increase in the number of professional people who are volunteering to keep themselves busy while they are unemployed. Such skilled people offer a valuable resource to schools, offering their time and energy at a time when schools are feeling the pinch of economic recession. This study looks at what motivates and sustains three parent volunteers. The questions it raises are worth considering if teachers are to use volunteers to their fullest potential.

Since my participants in the study were women, I began to read work that had been done by women in the field of personal development. In her book, In a Different Voice, Carol Gilligan (1982) developed an alternative to Kohlberg's stages of moral development. She believed that Kohlberg, who used men in his studies, had described moral stages of development for men and that these stages did not fit women. Gilligan produced a different framework from which she could

view the moral development of women. While Kohlberg had used the metaphor of a pyramid with the most developed stages at the apex, Gilligan used the metaphor of a web and based women's morality on their understanding of relationships and connectedness, a web upon which a woman moved from the outer strands to the centre as her moral view developed and matured. The women she interviewed became more sure of their place in the world as their view of their relationships became clearer. These relationships were with other people, with their environment, and with themselves as individuals. Gilligan believed that for women, the highest morality was an ethic of care. "The ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (p. 62).

An example of the kind of connectedness that Gilligan pointed to as evidence of moral growth appeared in the Chapter entitled "Crisis and Transition". Sarah, a young woman, had just gone through the long and difficult process of deciding to have an abortion. Following the abortion, she spoke of feeling "really connected with my insides, really good. I just feel in control of my life, not just sort of randomly drifting along" (p. 122). The feeling good was not a result of having the abortion. Rather, it came after having resolved the painful contradiction of being a bad person if she had the abortion and ended the future of her

possible child, and of being a bad person if she had a baby she did not want and was not able to support. The contradiction of those two positions forced Sarah into considering her relationship with the unborn child, with her boyfriend, with her divorced parents, and finally with herself and what she believed was right for her.

Gilligan emphasized that, for women, "identity and intimacy are intricately conjoined" (1982, p. 13). She equated this with an ethic of care. "The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world" (p. 100). Gilligan went further in her definition to include "the vision that everybody will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt" (p. 63). That is to say, the moral woman would be concerned with how she could create inclusive relationships that increased her responsibility for caring in the world; she would become more connected in her relationships. "The ethic of responsibility rests on an understanding that gives rise to compassion and care" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 165). This stands in contrast to Kohlberg's view that moral development moves through stages of increasing independence.

Nona Plessner Lyons in her analysis of Gilligan's work charted "The Connected Self" as:

Relationships:

experienced as
RESPONSE TO OTHERS
IN THEIR TERMS
a concern for the good
of others or for the
alleviation of their
burdens, hurt, or
suffering (physical
or psychological). (1988, p. 33) [Her format.]

The experience of suspending one's own world view to immerse in the world of another was crucial to Gilligan's explanation of how women view relationship differently from men. For men, morality rests in the fair and just application of mutually understood rules or codes of behaviour.

Lyons went further in her analysis of Gilligan's work.

> To be responsive requires seeing others in their own terms, entering into the situations of others in order to try to understand how they view their situations. Thus an assumption of this perspective is that others are different from oneself. (Lyons, 1988, p. 34)

Relations were not built on what people had in common but rather on what their differences were, not built on what people experienced as the same, but on what they could communicate of their uniqueness. Lyons reiterated Gilligan in defining this female view of the world as "a morality of

response and care" (Lyons, 1988, p. 35).

Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule in Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind (1986) analyzed women's development in terms of how women perceive and communicate knowledge. The authors described five stages of knowing for women: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. Women in each of these stages interpreted the world consistently from that perspective. When their personal development took them beyond the stage they were in and into the next stage they would respond to the world from a different paradigm, sometimes with radically different behaviours. This shift was similar to what I thought I had observed among the mothers who volunteered over a number of months or years in my classroom.

Belenky's et al. first category, silence, was particularly frightening. It was simply that these women had no inner voice to which they could refer. In my study I did not find anyone who was at this stage, although there were strong hints that one volunteer had started out there.

I did find the category of received knowledge, relevant. Belenky et al. found that many women saw their strength as being in the role of helper, in the sense of making a difference in the world by making things happen for someone who was in need. "That they can strengthen themselves

through the empowerment of others is essential wisdom often gathered by women" (Belenky, et al., 1986, p. 47). A woman who viewed herself in this way was "in the position of received knowing" (p. 48). She believed "that all knowledge originates outside of the self" (p. 48). In order to feel the power of her own ideas and influence in the world such a woman may have become "selfless" (p. 48) and found her satisfaction and personal development in helping others. Such selflessness was exhibited by women who volunteered for long hours to work with their own and other people's children in my class.

The third category, subjective knowledge, dealt with knowing by firsthand experience, finding the "inner voice" (p. 68).

> The discovery that firsthand knowledge is a valuable source of knowledge emerges again and again in the stories of subjectivist women. Suddenly all they experienced in the course of living takes on new meaning--pleasing others sensitized them to people's moods and needs, placating family members or close friends taught them negotiation and groups. (p. 61)

Subjectivist knowers were women who were finding ways of making connections and establishing places and times where they could experience others. They were interested in the how of events as they discovered themselves.

> Watching, listening subjectivists attract other persons' trust, in part because they listen and in part because they seem nonjudgmental. Many women told us about this important skill and how it kept them connected to others... Women's emphasis on beginning to hear themselves think, while gathering observations through watching and listening, is the precursor to reflective and critical thought. (p. 85)

A further aspect of subjectivists, and one that Belenky et al. found disturbing, was a tendency not to make strong connections with people. It was as though the need to understand was propelling them forward at such a pace that they could not stay in one place long enough to become strongly connected. As well, it was difficult for subjectivists to articulate their inner feelings.

> They watch and listen to themselves and begin to notice inner contradictions; they watch and listen to others and begin to draw comparisons between their own and other people's experience. They become aware of other as "other" in contrast to the more conformist women who diffuse distinctions between self and other and perceive people primarily in stereotypic terms. (1986, p. 85)

There was an "existential loneliness" (p. 84) in the

subjectivist's stance. In the context of subjective learners tuned in to their internal voices, Belenky and coleagues explained "it is the knowledge they gained about themselves that they valued" (p. 85). It was sometimes too far to reach to the experiences of the other and they were left alone in the universe.

The fourth category was procedural knowledge; that is, looking for a technique or procedure with which to analyze one's own situation and the situations of others which was not based on one's own subjective view of the world. It was holding the self at bay while experiencing the other in an empathetic relationship. The strength of the position was in its ability to understand and respond to others and learn from their perspective.

> Connected knowing builds on the subjectivists' conviction that the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities...Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge. At the heart of these procedures is the capacity for empathy. Since knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can hope to understand another person's ideas is to try and share the experience that has led the person to form the idea. (p. 113)

They were women who believed "they must act as connected rather than separate selves, seeing the other not in their own terms but in the other's terms" (ibid). Such an approach left one's self open for both pain and joy and required a kind of courageous vulnerability. "Connected knowers begin with an attitude of trust; they assume the other person has something good to say" (p. 116).

The researcher's fifth category discussed was the position of constructed knowledge. It was that insight which stated "**All knowledge is constructed**, and **the knower is an intimate part of the known**" (p. 137) [authors' italics]. There was evidence that all of the women in the study achieved this perspective to some degree in certain aspects of their development. However, it was the third woman in the study who most often took the stance of the constructed knower, who blended both what she learned from the outside world with what her inner self revealed to her.

Community and communication were issues for the women in my study. The Alternative Class was established as a community of parents looking for an alternative to traditional education, in whatever form they individually envisioned that to be. The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace by M. Scott Peck presented a view of community-building. "The key to community is acceptance--in fact, the celebration--of our individual and cultural differences" (1987, p. 186). He stated that this was the way to overcome

the "problem of pluralism" (p. 186). For Peck "the rules of communication are best taught and only learned through the practice of community-making" (p. 325). Community-building led to growth; to learning a new set of rules by which the participants could live together.

Significance and Limitations of the Study

Significance

In looking at the research available, it seemed that nowhere was there serious consideration given to what motivated parents to volunteer in a school. There is some acknowledgement of the importance of specific interventions by specific groups of parents in specific instances, but it is the value to the school or to the child that is the focus of such research. Informally, teachers have said to me that the school could not run without volunteers. There are over 150 such volunteers throughout the year in the school where I work which has a student population of approximately 300. Although, as teachers, we all quite genuinely thank our volunteers, no serious study of what brings people back to volunteer has been undertaken. Thus, the most significant feature of this work is to identify the benefits to the volunteers of participation in school life.

As a by-product of the study, many of the motivating factors behind parents becoming involved in the Alternative

Class were brought forward. It seemed, to me, at times, as though the two issues were inseparable: what aroused interest in parents enroling their children in the class was the same as what prompted them to come into the class as volunteers.

The primary method of research was interviews. While listening to the interviews I often had to question my assumptions around how I teach, how I am seen by parents of children I teach, and how schools are dealing with a better educated body of parents demanding a greater voice in how their children are to be educated. Thus the research was personally and professionally significant for me because it forced me to view my work as a teacher through different eyes.

Limitations

The children in the class were normal five to nine-year-olds. As a result of the research approach I chose, the children's personal lives were very exposed. To be fair, I would caution the reader to remember that children living with family separation, unresolved anger, shyness, learning to make friends, and other problems of growing up sit in most elementary classrooms. In this Alternative Class parents were available to give additional attention to children with problems -personalized attention that would not have been possible in most mainstream classrooms unless the school had

a Guidance Counsellor on staff. In this thesis the spotlight was often on the problem while the child was not given a voice.

It would have been of interest to me as the teacher of the Alternative Class to compare the difference in work produced by students whose parents do volunteer in the classroom and those students whose parents do not come into the classroom on a regular basis. For the individual student, what effect does the parent's presence in the classroom for the half-day have on the student as compared to the other nine half-days when the parent is not in the classroom? The answers to those questions belong to another thesis.

One mother involved in the study said to me that if we were to do the interviews over today she would answer things differently. That is valid and perhaps true but the reality communicated during the interviews stands on its own for that time and place.

As in all research, some limitation had to be put on numbers of participants. I chose a number of participants I felt I could handle. To interview three parents was not to say that they were representational of the larger body of the parent community. These women told their own stories. It is up to the listener to make connections from their own encounters with volunteers and schools. This is not an attempt to answer the question for all time of what motivates all women to volunteer in classrooms; it is, quite simply, an

opportunity for these three women to tell their experiences.

Chapter 2

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Having chosen the perspective of the study to be that of the parent volunteer, and particularly her understanding of what was taking place for her during her involvement with the Alternative Class, I considered a number of models for conducting an ethnographic study and settled on Spradley's methodology for ethnographic case studies (Spradley, 1979) as a place to begin.

I was working relatively new ground in terms of the point of view I had established and I felt that I would take the advice of Miles and Huberman who recommended data which consists of "well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes [my emphasis] occurring in local contexts" (1984, p. 15). The idea of how things worked and how such workings appeared to the participant fitted my interest in the parent volunteer's perspective. Spradley explained how to use data gleaned from interviews to "develop theories grounded in empirical data of cultural description" and he goes on to expand the notion of grounded description which "Glasser and Strauss have called this grounded theory" (Spradley, 1979, p. 11). The move from interview to theory was explicit, first the interviews, then the theoretical framework based in well-grounded, well-documented material.

From the interviews I expected to find themes into which the participants' thoughts and experiences could be grouped. From material in each theme I could develop and analyze emerging themes. In practice I found that things were not nearly so clear cut, but Spradley gave me a framework from which I could establish a procedure for examining processes.

Procedure

I conducted two lengthy interviews and one follow-up interview with each of three women volunteers selected from the class list of mothers of children from the previous year. These were women who had volunteered regularly on a weekly basis for at least one year. Although I had hoped to find participants whose children were no longer with the class, I found this was not entirely possible. One interviewee was a mother who fit all the other qualifications but still had children in the class.

Interviews were carried out in the participant's homes with the exception of the third interview of one woman who requested a meeting at my house for her convenience. My feeling was that being in their own homes would put the mothers at ease. The alternative, which I had to reject as impractical since I was no longer the teacher of the Alternative Class at the time of the interviews, was to hold the interviews in the classroom in the hope of triggering

memories of particular moments and sequences of events. In fact, I did find being on their own turf seemed to put the women at ease and certainly made arrangements a lot easier around their busy timetables involving children, husbands, sisters and the sundry other affairs that come with family. Convenience was certainly a factor in making the interview situation more relaxed.

I taped all the interviews and transcribed them later. Any notes I took at the site were to add some clarity to the tapes or to remind me to ask something that I wanted clarified. For the first interview I had a short list of prepared questions as points of reference. The second interview was easier in that I had transcribed the first one and from the transcribing I had formed questions about issues I wished to clarify. The second interview always went smoothly and quickly since we were in some senses reviewing and enlarging previously covered material. My notebook was also more in evidence for the second interview. The third interview was done after the analysis of the first two was completed and written in draft form. I simply turned on the tape, had the participant read the analysis to herself and discuss any comments with me. I informed them that I wanted any and all feedback and if anything was incorrect, either facts or interpretation, they were to tell me. I then transcribed this final interview and added changes that they suggested. Much to my relief there were only a few details

with which any of the women found issue and these in no way required re-analyzing the material. I did not have to make the decision as to what I would do if one of them had said, "No, that is not at all what I meant."

Spradley (1979, p. 28) warned against conducting interviews with friends because of the volume of unspoken material that passes between people who know each other well; information which would go unnoticed on tape or even by the participants--interviewer and interviewee alike. He believes, and I tend to agree with him, that body language such as a nod convey complex messages. Casual acquaintances have to be much more verbal than friends and explain things to each other in greater detail. In addition, a certain classroom jargon had developed with all the parents and myself by virtue of working together in close proximity over a long period of time. We spoke of "doing centres" and all of the volunteers knew what that would look like. An outsider might have no idea of what "doing a centre" might be at all. The issue of private, shared language was one that I had to be aware of and I had to be on guard against slipping comfortably into familiar jargon.

In order to provide a focus for the first interview with each of the women, I came to it with five prepared questions. They were open ended and useful as springboards. In fact I never did ask all five questions in the form they were written out; the participants answered most of the questions

somewhere in the interview in their own manner. The questions were:

1. When did you first become interested in the Alternative Class for your child?
2. How do you feel the class compared to a "regular" class?
3. What contribution did you make to the class, since parent participation was an expectation?
4. What are your feelings about education and what are your experiences with the school system?
5. How do you feel teachers should be with kids? (Or, what picture do you have of what the ideal classroom would look like?)

I suited formulation of the questions to the situation with the interviewee. I found that they were certainly adequate to gather an hour's worth of data, sometimes more. I decided that an hour would be an adequate time frame for an interview, although in most cases we went over the projected hour.

Protecting the anonymity of participants was important to me. I changed person and place names, life histories and even the gender of children while still maintaining the details of the women's lives.

For the second interview the questions were unique to each of the women since the interviews had to be examined individually for those themes that I wanted to expand upon. Some preliminary analysis had to be done before the second

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interview could take place. The third interview was conducted after a full analysis of the first two interviews with that participant.

Participants

Although I had not initially intended that all the participants should be women, it was a truth of the class that in almost all instances, the in-class volunteers were women. In all instances the long term volunteers who came out week after week for one, two, or three years were women. Generally male volunteers would get called away from the class by the demands of their jobs, something that also happened with the women but they fought against it with more success. So I ended up with three women in the study. I was very pleased that happened for it enabled me to pursue a direction in my analysis that was consistently female, and it gave me more room for comparison. There was consistency of gender and I was not drawn into the issue of explaining to or apologizing for one or the other of the sexes.

The women were all mothers of children in the class and they were all volunteers in the classroom for a period of at least once a week for a year or more. Two had left the class the previous year and one still had children in the class. My feeling was that mothers who were no longer involved with the class might have come to some conclusions

that were still in progress for those still in the class. I did feel that any more than a year away from the classroom and memories would fade. At no time did I try to do an analysis comparing women who were still involved with the class to those whose children had left the class.

Analysis of the Data

After the first two interviews were conducted with the first participant I analyzed them for emergent categories and themes. Certain themes became clear. In analyzing subsequent interviews I used these themes as a framework and added themes which were unique to the new participant. All interviews were transcribed before analysis took place and before the next interview was conducted. Although themes appeared to fall into headings as major themes, I kept sub-headings to provide focus and detail. For example, under the heading of communication were sub-themes of communication between parent and parent, parent and teacher, parent and child, and child and child. Although communication is the umbrella under which all these themes reside, each of them offer a look at a unique relationship and is maintained as such.

The purpose of the third interview was to validate the insights gained into each theme and to be certain that analysis had not become dominant to the point of risking

loss of groundedness of the data. The insights gathered in the third interview were included in the final draft of the analysis of each individual.

References to the interviews are given by a letter indicating the first initial of the woman's name, followed by a Roman numeral indicating the interview number (I, II, or III), followed by a number indicating the transcript page on which it can be found. Hence J-II-6 refers Jo's second interview, page six.

Chapter 3

RESULTS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The Women

Jo was involved with the Alternative Class for two years during which her son, Ed, was in Grades 3 and 4. He had previously attended an alternative class in Toronto while he was in the custody of his father after the breakup of the marriage. Ed was the first of our students to have had previous alternative education experience before he came to Centreville. It is relevant to the study to understand that Jo had recently regained custody of her children. Although Ed went to stay with his father on alternate weekends, Jo was the primary care-giver.

I chose Jo for the first interviews because she had been in the class long enough to be thoroughly familiar with its inner workings and she had volunteered extensively both in the class and on evening committees. She was a very articulate woman and seemed to have enough of life's experiences behind her to give breadth to her views. I loved talking with her and felt that she would be a good person to begin the interview process. She also met the criterion of having been out of the class for a year; Ed had gone on to a regular Grade 5 class in his local school. I felt that would

have given Jo ample time to compare the two types of classes, the Alternative and the mainstream. I believed it was important to get the views of a parent on the transition to a mainstream class.

I had some concerns that I would be too close to Jo. It was the same concern I had with all the mothers. As the teacher, I had developed a relationship with everyone who was a regular in the classroom and Jo was no exception. There was no one who had been deeply involved with the class with whom I had not become friends over the four years. After Jo and Ed left the class we had seen little of each other, which was part of the pattern of entering and leaving. I felt confident that Jo and I had put enough distance between us that it would balance out over the course of three interviews. Our success was due to Jo's efforts. Even as I stumbled through the uncertainties of tape recorder, interview questions, meeting times that would work for both of us, cats that distracted and a wind that fluttered in the microphone, she continued to speak in her clear, energetic manner.

We did our first two interviews outside in the hot summer sun on Jo's front lawn. It was a lovely spot. Jo had her Coke and I sipped on a glass of water. The cows outside the cow barn across the road swatted flies with their tails, swallows swooped down on us nearly skimming the tops of our heads, and occasionally a farmer would drive by on his

tractor pulling a wagonload of hay bales. It was very pastoral, peaceful and conducive to intimate conversation. Except for the cat, we were alone at the house. Ed was with his father for that part of the summer and the girls were elsewhere. The interviews were a week apart and the warm weather lasted through both. The third interview was conducted in my livingroom as Jo was on her way home from work.

Georgia was involved with the Alternative Class for three years. Her oldest daughter, Kim, attended Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2 in the class and then moved to her neighbourhood school for Grade 3. The change was not in any way a disagreement with the philosophy of the Alternative program rather, the move came as a result of other considerations. At that time, Sally, Kim's younger sister who was going into Grade 1, enroled in the neighbourhood school as well. For both of Georgia's children, the Alternative Class was their introduction to formal education.

Georgia was a very capable and intelligent woman who worked in the field of early childhood education. The family was doing well financially: her husband ran his own business successfully and Georgia worked part time in a professional job outside the home. Their marriage came out of many years of dating and appeared destined for many more years together. With her husband, her children and the many members of her

extended family who lived in the area, Georgia seemed to have a very stable and well rounded life. In part, I chose her for these reasons.

Her participation in the class was, as with the other members of this study, in depth. She was a weekly volunteer for all three of the years her children were registered. She served on the parents' committee, held various offices there, and actively joined in special events such as field trips, swimming, camping, and the like. The Christmas I began the interviews with her she had been out of the class since the previous spring so she met the criteria of having had a child in the class the year before the interviews took place but having been out of the class for some time. As well, I found her to be an acute observer of children and very articulate when relating these observations. I felt she would be a good choice as a participant on all counts.

Georgia and I were friends through her children being in the class and as such we had the private language of the classroom in common. I was aware that this could be a data gathering problem but felt that my experience with Jo would hold me in good stead and that I would have to work at being aware of Alternative Class special terms. Since we were working closely together it would be impossible and undesirable for some private shorthand not to develop.

We did the interviews at Georgia's kitchen table with the tape recorder placed between us. The first interview was in

the afternoon with my daughter there to play with Kim's and Sally's new Christmas toys. There were some interruptions but generally the interview went well. For the second interview we moved to an evening time slot when Georgia's children were in bed. That seemed to be more relaxing for her.

After each of the interviews I typed the transcripts and analyzed them looking for material that could be collected in themes similar to those established with Jo. I looked for additional themes introduced by Georgia (see "Communication" and "If It Doesn't Work" below) and themes that were there with Jo but were not there with Georgia.

Ethel was so intensely involved in the class that she could not be overlooked. I remember one parent saying that Ethel was the backbone of the class. She was on the Executive Committee, was present at every Parent's Meeting, came into the classroom once a week or more to do her volunteer time, and drove for most of our fieldtrips. Her dedication to the class was remarkable even among such a committed group.

Ethel had two children in the class. They were still present when the study began. I simply ran out of mothers whose children had left the previous year who would agree to be participants. I did feel I knew her too well to keep an objective distance during the interviews. To try and achieve

some space between us I asked her to have a friend present during the first interview--someone who was not familiar with the class, someone who would force us to explain ourselves if we became too insular in our discussions. When I arrived the friend who had agreed to be there did not show up. We did the interview anyway and, I think, achieved some good results. The second interview she asked her sister to be present. The interview went very well with some interesting interactions between the two of them. The third interview was very short. It focused on having Ethel read the transcripts of the first two and confirming that they were fine.

Ethel is a single, working mother. She and her husband separated while their children were in the class so the separation became part of the dynamics of their school lives. She worked in the field of child care and counselling. She was articulate and thoughtful with a strong set of beliefs about how children should be educated.

We met in the evenings. Her children and my daughter played together in front of the television during the first interview and we were alone with her sister for the second.

After each of the interviews I analyzed the typed transcripts for material that fell into themes similar to those with Jo and Georgia. I also looked for additional themes and themes which had been present with Jo or Georgia but were not there with Ethel.

Thematic Categories

The Alternative Class had been established with a belief in parent participation. That involvement was what enabled the mothers I interviewed to be present for their children's learning. In listening to the participants in the study I realized that these women were struggling with how their children lived in the world as young people having lives of their own in school. They were also struggling with how to deal with the other parents in the class, people dedicated to some kind of alternative for their children. The class brought out the sense that everyone's efforts were towards the same end: being together as a community of parents supporting the ideals of the class allowed for personal growth among those who were involved.

The other Alternative Class aspect that provided room for growth was the classroom itself. The image of school that parents carried of school was dated in most instances. Merely being in contact with the new theories and techniques of learning was a discovery to some. Certainly having in-service workshops to explain the curriculum changed many of their views of the classroom as did the daily contact with modern curriculum.

Perhaps the most important element for change was the opportunity for dialogue with others, as was reflected time and again in the interviews. Communication happened at all

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levels: parent and child, teacher and parent, parent and parent, teacher and child, parent and administrator, parent and press, and so on. An enormous amount of information was being exchanged because people were in contact with each other through the avenues of meetings, social gatherings, committee work, and being in the classroom.

As I worked through my analysis of the interviews I found that I could categorize the themes into two groups. The first group were themes which reflected aspects of the class that encouraged personal growth. The second group of themes described the personal growth of the women. The first set of themes included More Active/Less Traditional, Without Realizing You're Doing It, Connectedness, Being There For Your Own and Others' Children, Ownership by Parents, Community, Communication, The Teacher Assistant Role, and If It Doesn't Work. The second set of themes which were more directly descriptive of personal growth were Affirmation and Change.

From time to time in the analysis I will be relating the participants statements to references concerning women's development from writers mentioned in Chapter 1.

More Active/Less Traditional

Jo established the dichotomy between active education in which children are encouraged to participate in their own

learning and discover concepts for themselves and what she defined as the traditional view of school work, learning taking place from behind desks lined up in straight rows. "I always believed that there was a better way to educate children than the traditional method of sitting in straight rows and listening to a teacher talk at length about things we were supposed to be learning" (J-I-4). The belief that there was something more than the traditional method ran throughout her interviews.

In the second interview she referred to a more "holistic approach" (J-II-32) where "learning was incorporated and not segmented...you could do an exercise that...started out being a mathematical exercise but it also incorporated English and...some scientific element,...we're going to learn to write a story about a graph" (J-II-32). This she held in contrast to "this whole emphasis...on science and computers...it'll turn out kids who can whip off mathematical equations...but couldn't write a letter to a friend [laughs] to save their souls" (J-II-31, 32). Jo seemed to have a strong sentiment about her educational preferences for her own children. She wanted their schooling to be a balance of high technology and the high touch skills of communication.

Georgia came to alternative education out of her own experiences in the daycare system. She said concerning the way discipline was handled in Kim's nursery class,

> I think the teachers tend to step in a lot

more in that early age group and perhaps maybe they shouldn't. And, or maybe be aware but not maybe step in and control so much. So the experience she had there was more the teachers were controlling the environment a lot more. (G-I-8)

Her sense of traditional schooling rested in the way teachers dealt with conflict in the child's world and how the children then learned or did not learn to deal with problems. "I found that when she went into the Alternative Class we didn't control it as much...kids learned how to socialize and it was their little world and they learned how to control it themselves" (G-I-8).

For Georgia, having trained in the nursery school style of experiential learning and a low teacher-student ratio, the twenty-five to one situation with a traditional Kindergarten teacher was only one option. She looked around to see what else was available. What she wanted for her oldest daughter was to "put her somewhere where it would draw her out a little more" (G-I-4). She believed that children needed to be able to speak out and to interact in the early years of school if they were to succeed later on. "If you can give a child a really strong foundation of feeling confident, not being afraid to make mistakes, and being able to relate socially, then anything on top of that in academics is secondary and easy to handle" (G-I-20).

That is not to say that Georgia was not concerned about academics. Like all parents in the class it was a worry. "My biggest fear of the whole thing was that she might be academically behind. I came to terms with that about the second year" (G-I-17). Some kind of balance had to be found for her to deal with the traditional emphasis on curriculum and the new emphasis she placed on confidence and social skills. Somehow, like the other parents who remained in the class, Georgia "came to terms" (G-I-17) with her fears and doubts.

For Ethel, meaning in education came out of the questions that were asked. "School's all about those questions that come to your mind when you're working with something in the classroom and learning how to go and find those answers for yourself" (E-I-8). Ownership of the questions that are addressed became her issue in the classroom. She saw her own education as having been something she went through to satisfy someone else. Her understanding of school centred on whose questions were being answered, the teacher's or the student's.

> I felt like I was answering somebody else's questions for them....it didn't feel like it was my education. I didn't feel any ownership in it....It wasn't any personal kind of, okay, ...this is my education , you know. And it's my responsibility and I want to do well for

myself and these are the questions I want to ask and this is how the teacher can help me to answer those questions. (E-I-5, 6)

She was not satisfied with that situation for herself and was quite certain how things could have been different.

I would have liked to have had more personal contact with the teacher...I don't ever remember teachers really asking me and discussing with me my education...how can we work together so you can acquire these skills this year. So I guess I would have liked more personal contact. (E-I-3)

The desire for some kind of communication between herself and her teachers was clearly evident. She saw the role of the teacher as encouraging the student to "contemplate, you know, what am I interested in? What would I like to learn about?" (E-I-4, 5). Although she did well because she wanted to succeed she "would have liked it to have been different" (E-I-4).

When it came time for her own children to attend school she wanted that difference. "What I wanted to see for my kids was to see them coming up with their own questions and experiment with ways how they could answer those questions" (E-I-6). What she had experienced was a system where "the kids weren't given an opportunity to explore enough...they were given a lot of the knowledge rather than taught how to

find the knowledge for themselves" (E-II-11).

Being in the classroom gave Ethel the opportunity to present some choices to the students she contacted. Her description of working out a sorting activity with a group of younger students demonstrated her understanding of choices. She imagined herself to be the student.

> I've chosen the shells. This is what I want to sort and then--now I get to decide how I want to sort them. Then I get to decide whether I want to be first or second to tell whoever's going to write them down. And I get to chose what colour I want my word written on the paper in. So as they get to make all those choices it feels more like their own experience rather than me just trying to spoon feed them some knowledge. (E-I-17)

When she was there with the small group, Ethel gave them all the choices that she could think of in that situation. For her, choice and ownership were what was different about the Alternative Class, a difference made possible because parents were there to give the children the extra attention they needed.

Each of the women was looking for something different from their view of the traditional classroom. Jo felt that she had been excluded from her children's education and was determined to become more involved. Georgia was looking for

a place where her daughter could receive more attention and be allowed to come out of her shell. Ethel resented the schooling that she had received and wanted something more self-directed for her children. All the mothers saw the Alternative Class as a possible way of attaining these goals which was not available to them in a traditional school setting.

Without Realizing You're Doing It

For Jo, part of the attractiveness of the holistic approach was that children learned "without realizing they're doing it" (J-I-4). She referred to this sense of having discovered something after the experience of it made it real.

> I don't know if you even realized you were looking for it, I think maybe you just realized you found it...I think you just connect with someone and realize that it's there and there was something missing before that you got now. That's all. (J-I-11)

She described feeling "vastly dispossessed, my whole life had been really, really shaken up on just about every level" (J-II-33). The divorce and losing her home of five years shook her to her roots but she was not aware of what was missing in her life. "I don't think I ever consciously thought...in terms of missing my home or missing my life...I

just knew something was missing" (J-II-34). In a personal sense, she understood that she had gone through a process of doing things in her life that were important to her but they had not necessarily been a result of conscious decisions. "Without even realizing you're doing it you're sort of sloughing a lot of things off that aren't really important and sort of getting down to a more basic level" (J-I-42). Awareness of her personal growth is reflected in her understanding of the deeper workings of her own psyche. For her, learning was something that happened within the self even when the mind was not aware of it taking place.

Georgia spoke of her inability to accept that her children were growing out of early childhood into the middle years and on into adolescence. She said, "I was not looking forward to the next stage cause it was very unknown" (G-II-32,33). She identified as a "block" (G-II-33) her not looking forward to her children growing up. I suggested part of the reason she was in the class was to examine this block to develop a sense that it was alright (G-II-33) for her children to grow up. Her response was to acknowledge some underlying processing which she had undergone and was now moving beyond. The larger implication was that once the process was complete her need to have her children in the class was done.

G: I didn't go into it that way, like consciously thinking that.

A: No, no, no. But looking back at it?

G: But looking back, uh, that's what I seem to have gotten out of it was that. That was a missing piece for me and I felt really comfortable doing that.

A: So once that piece was in place you were comfortable leaving the class?

G: Yah.

A: And putting your kids out here? [In the neighbourhood school.]

G: Yah. (G-II-33)

Although there was a certain sadness in leaving the Alternative Class it was evident that Georgia was comfortable making that change. She had worked through the inexpressible need to accept her children were growing up and she was able to articulate that need. After having been heavily involved with the class for three years she left it and returned her children to her neighbourhood school. She was willing to take on a changing relationship with her maturing children.

Although Ethel seemed very sure of her beliefs about what education should be for her children she admitted that she "wasn't really aware of what I was getting into...other than I would have a chance to explore education and different ways of educating children" (E-I-7, 8). It was "the process of exploring education" (E-I-8) that attracted her to the class.

As an adult, as a mother, she was asking those questions that went unasked by her as a child. Without being aware of what she was getting into, there was enough there for her to

attach herself to the process.

All three women became involved in the Alternative Class because they felt they were missing something in their present lives. Although they could not articulate what that was at the time, they were later able to say what brought about their commitment. They all had some sense of going into things for reasons that were not conscious initially but became clear over time.

Connectedness

For each woman the need to become connected with others was clearly evident even though their individual motivations for making connections appeared to be very different.

Jo believed that friends filled an unidentified need that only became clear after the friendship has developed for some time. "I think you just connect with someone and realize that it's there and there was something missing before that you got now" (J-I-11). This outward connectedness was involved in developing community, in developing a feeling of being connected to other people by way of social interactions.

As well, Jo held a view of the students in the class as a community unto themselves, one she could connect with for affirmation in much the same way as adult relationships supported her. "I just needed something really positive and

uplifting in my life and that did it" (J-I-39). The support happened for her in the way the children spontaneously reacted to her.

> The first time one of the other kids, not your own, but one of the other kids says, 'Hi, Jo, how ya doing?', or you know, come over and give you a big hug and asks you something right off the bat. You know, that just feeling connected. (J-I-39)

She spoke of the community of children as a separate and viable unit and something adults went to for sustenance, a place from which she herself drew life and energy.

The very important dimension of being connected on an adult level to other adults involved interaction between different parents in the class. It was a way of being "just sort of connected with people...other parents in the classroom have kids and we developed relationships that went beyond the classroom" (J-I-10). Interaction produced feedback. What Jo put out to others in her growing community came back to her as additional information, a rebuttal of her own misconceptions, or confirmation of her own worth. In dialogue she was able to formulate a vision of the world that was more closely aligned to the changes she had made in her new life as a single mother. She could leave behind the misconception of herself as a fake and find her own "inner voice" (Belenky, et al., 1986, p. 68). By connecting to

other parents who shared her belief in a more holistic education and by throwing herself into the experience of the Alternative Class she was able to build her self-confidence. She was able to regain her belief in herself and in her ability to care for the children who had been taken from her by the divorce.

It cannot be overstated how completely debilitated she was by the court battle. "It just had a real undermining affect on my whole sense of self, I think. Right down to the very core of my being" (J-II-40). The way out, for Jo, lay in making a whole new set of connections that reconstructed her world in a way that permitted her to regain her self-respect. Relationships gave her back her sense of self through the kind of feedback and mirroring that came from being close to people. Her understanding was expressed clearly in her knowledge that the children themselves formed relationships with her that paralleled adult relationships and those relationships could both enlarge and reflect her strengths. She saw that she was not simply in the classroom helping the children, but she was there in a relationship with them where they returned her helpfulness with hugs and a "sense of carefreeness that can be infectious" (J-I-42). As she entered the community of the classroom, she was responsive to the interplay of her caregiving and the joyfulness that the children gave back to her.

In her desire to care for her son who had just been

returned to her by the courts, Jo needed reassurance that she was doing what was expected of her as a mother. She found such reassurance partly by being a volunteer in the classroom and by meeting other parents and establishing relationships with them. "I was always picking somebody's brain, you know. And I also found that other parents did the same thing" (J-I-24). It was important to her that she see herself as not being alone in her concerns. "I can think of half a dozen parents who asked me how their kids were doing. So we had this constant thing going back and forth" (J-I-25). By talking with other parents and getting "mega feedback" (J-I-26) she was able to get a "rounded idea" (J-I-26) of what Ed was like in the classroom when she was not there. She also grew to trust what other people were telling her, that her son "was maybe stronger that I thought, than the impression he was giving me. That he was better able to cope" (J-II-35). She was able to regard her son with less worry and begin to build toward trusting him based on the strengths she was able to see in him. Although she was going through many personal changes at the time, Jo seemed to have started from a position of received knowledge, listening to others who knew better than herself. She did not stay in this position long but moved through to a subjectivist stance fairly quickly.

Georgia took a subjectivist viewpoint with her emphasis on experiencing others. Connections to other people were of

paramount importance. Caring for and giving to others, primarily children, motivated many of her interactions in the classroom. "I felt close to most of the class and so I wanted to see how they were doing on a regular basis. I wanted to be a part of watching them, all of them, sort of change and grow" (G-I-29). In wanting to be a part of their lives and to maintain closeness with them Georgia was drawn into the classroom as a volunteer, but also drawn into daily interactions that went beyond an interest in helping out with academic skills. She watched the children as they were dropped off at "goodbye and arrival times" (G-II-28). How they "interacted with their parents" (G-II-28) added to her understanding of the children. At parent meetings she searched out particular parents to see how they "interacted with other people. And so some of the characteristics I would see in the children I would see in the parents. And so it would just make a quick connection in terms of a child" (G-II-28). Georgia was not merely content to have a cursory knowledge of the children with whom she was involved; she wanted to "know them really well" (G-II-9). She wanted to know where they were coming from in terms of background and how they dealt with their lives. She described an intimacy that was compelling, that went beyond her explanation of "some kids you just really connect with, you know" (G-II-32).

Georgia referred to "daily contact" and "going through all those days with the class as a whole unit from Kindergarten

to Grade 4" (G-II-8). In the full spectrum of primary grade ages she found the reason for her involvement. She valued the closeness and found verification of its presence in "the way they would look at me and talk to me. You know, 'Hi, how are you. You're here. You're in today. Come over and watch what I'm doing'" (G-I-30). In the daily interactions that were so important to her she found connectedness. Connectedness became a way of growing and moving out of the familiar pattern of life with nursery age children.

Georgia spoke of using the activities as a means of "interacting" with children (G-I-26). As she looked closer at the middle childhood stage of development she found she did not have to give up the fun as her children grew. She examined children's "social lives" (G-II-30) and "enjoyed helping them with their academic work" (G-II-32). She developed new skills that enabled her to get closer to children and glean further insights, to "just sit quietly with them and talk a little bit in just little sentences" (G-II-31)--and she "had to learn to listen more" (G-I-27). As the connections were made and her skills developed Georgia found she "felt comfortable talking to them about just some personal things that were happening in their lives" (G-I-27). It was the kind of connected intimacy that Carol Gilligan spoke of when she said "the ethic of responsibility rests on an understanding that gives rise to compassion and care" (1982, p. 165). Georgia had spent much of her adult life

being responsible for children and seemed to be in the process of enlarging upon that responsibility. The depth of her caring was evident. "I'm not sure how many kids get a chance to talk sometimes. I wouldn't say very much, just a few things, like being sensitive about the fact that there's a new baby" (G-II-31). She sat with children and listened to them, and tinkered with ways of listening.

> I found it goes better if you give children space...they're not as quick to articulate sometimes, so they're thinking. And while they're thinking I used to feel that they were stuck so I would talk for them. I don't do that quite so much (G-I-28).

The ways of children were not a mystery any longer, there were reasons for their behaviour. As the reasons emerged and Georgia's understanding grew, so did her confidence. The world of middle childhood was not a foreign land to her.

The obvious importance that Georgia placed on doing things for her children, on an image of herself as powerful when she empowered others, and on the work she put into creating a secure place for her children was reflected in what she called the core of society. "The core of society for me is that if my kids can do well and care about people and be socially comfortable...it's not a big issue for me if they don't do well academically" (G-I-18). Gilligan believed, for women, the highest morality was an ethic of care and that was

what Georgia sought for her children. An extremely moral person, she struggled with her personal ethics as her children grew up and moved into a less than perfect world.

> I found that being able to relate to people as I grew older seemed to be more of an important skill than some other things such as money or education, that people who can relate to people, who care about other people, seem to have a happier life than other people who are focused more on other areas. And I guess that was what I wanted for my kids. (G-II-18)

Ethel also believed in giving children support when they needed it. She had moved into the realm of the connected knower, a way of gaining procedural knowledge (see discussion of Belenky et al. above). She explained the role of the parent volunteer in the classroom as "being an available adult in the lives of the kids" (E-I-15). She defined "an available adult" as "I'm present in the situation but I'm not the one that's actually discovering something" (E-I-17). Like those young women in Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule's (1986) analysis who were connected knowers (p. 113), Ethel spoke of the child's view of the learning situation, of the child's world which she would enter into rather than imposing her adult view upon the child.

Her way of establishing a connected relationship was to sit a couple of minutes and ask, "Is there something you

would like me to help you with?" (E-I-15). She believed that if she made herself "present and available the kids would come [to her]" (E-I-14). By simply being available in close proximity and by asking for what the child wanted of her, Ethel was able to partake of the children's lives. The personal contact was what she saw as her role in the classroom. Even when referring to an academic activity, such as reading short passages with a number of children she called it "an opportunity to make contact with several of the children in the class in a short period of time" (E-I-12). The emphasis for her was on the contact she had with the children. Ethel related to the children from "a morality of response and care" (Lyons, 1988, p. 35).

Although her self-esteem had been very low when she first became involved with the class and she did not feel capable of competing with more educated parents in the class, Ethel found herself a part of the social circle that grew out of parent meetings and class involvement. "Because we all shared the same interest of being involved in the classroom with our kids, it gave us a base of where to start to communicate with each other...that's basically how the friendships started" (E-II-2). And as the years went on she "had a chance to build strong friendships, close friendships" (E-II-2). Her self-esteem was given the boost it needed. She found she had much in common with other parents, even if they were better educated. What counted was that "jointly,

we all valued whatever anyone could offer to the classroom" (E-II-8). What she had to offer were the skills of empathy and connectedness, a procedure for opening children up to alleviate their suffering in whatever sense--be it a math problem or a fight on the playground. As she gained confidence and involved herself with both children and parents she was able to see her own strengths and develop some adult relationships based on her interest in children. Her moral stance, viewing the other's world from the other's viewpoint, was not only confirmed in the classroom but valued by those other adults who had their children in the class.

Of interest was the common ground for all three women: their motivation for reaching out and making connections was other directed. Jo was concerned about her son and needed to know if he was emotionally healthy. Georgia felt compelled to discover as much as she could about each of the children in the class so that she could better understand them and the realities of middle childhood which were advancing on her own children. Ethel was practicing a procedure that allowed her to bring children out of themselves. There was, in looking at each of these three women, a sense of their concern for the welfare of others with whom they had contact. As they enlarged their circle of influence they also enlarged their circle of responsibility.

Being There For Your Own And Others' Children

It took Jo a year and a half to regain custody of her son and daughters. This new responsibility was thrust upon her after having been previously denied access to her children by her husband when he was granted custody after the separation. When custody was then granted to her Jo was informed by the court that her husband would continue to have their son visit him during holidays and every other weekend despite the fact that he had been convicted of sexually assaulting his daughters.

> What was more bizarre about it, Andy, was not that he was a weekend father, but that he had access at all given the circumstances...that all those parental rights were still being recognized in spite of his abuse of two of his three children. (J-III-24)

Jo wondered at the unfairness of the justice system and could not comprehend what behaviours were expected of her since she had been denied her children after the divorce while her abusive husband retained his privileges even after his conviction. In the turmoil of those reversals she had to constantly ask herself, "How does a woman go about proving she is a good mother?"

> While that whole court thing was going on... everything I did as a mother and as a person

was called into question on some level or another...if I leave my kids with a babysitter...was I going to become a bad mother in court? (J-III-26)

Jo also had a real concern for how Ed viewed her involvement in the class and what kind of support she could offer him while she was in the classroom.

> It was really important to him that I was there as much as I was. And he was really going through a hard time. I think as a transition move to a new life, and a new school, and a new community...it was the absolute ideal thing for us to be doing at the time. (J-I-17)

The importance of the "us" is not to be underestimated for it was in her newly acquired responsibilities in the mother-child relationship that Jo was finding herself. She had moved from the outer strands on her web of her relationships to a place nearer to the centre, a place of much greater trust and caring in her children's lives even while she was experiencing a crisis in her understanding of being a mother. She underwent a shift in how she fit in her children's lives; she had to take the time to consider and reflect on all the other relationships in her life and put them in their relative places. It was a long and chaotic process but Jo found it opened enormous energy and resources within herself.

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Georgia spent a half day a week in the classroom every week for three years. Being physically present in the classroom was important to her. She was there for her own purposes, to see her children in their day-to-day environment and to share what took place. "I guess part of me being there was more my want, probably a lot my wanting...you just don't see them as much when you're working and you see them a little bit in the evening and then they're gone" (G-II-21). As her children grew older Georgia knew she would have less contact with them. She would not be part of their lives to the same extent and she had to come to terms with that fact of life. She saw it coming and knew that the class may have been her last chance before they turn "seven, eight , nine" (G-II-21).

She wanted to understand, or as she had said before, know her children. "So to be able to understand how your child goes through a whole day in his world is very different from the parent who just drops their child off or picks them up" (G-II-9). She wanted something with a little more depth to it than a kiss at the door and a short discussion at the end of the day. She was looking for a sense of "progression or change or anything. Just being there physically seeing it. Watching. Watching the interactions. Watching the kids fit" (G-I-17). Seeing how the children fit together socially, seeing how they develop through the course of a year in their reading skills or how they learn their math facts, those were

the things that Georgia was looking for. It was a mystery to her how some parents could not find the time to be in the classroom and see how their children developed. "There are still ways you can take time off to be in the classroom with your child occasionally" (G-I-34). To her, it was important enough to take time away from work to be there with her children for a period of time each week.

She was affirmed in her belief that the relationship she had with her children was a healthy one that allowed them room to grow. "They could do their own things with their friends and be off and not even, you know, drive in my car for field trips because it's not a one time shot" (G-I-47). It was important to Georgia that her children realize that they could have their own lives with their friends even when Mom was present. It would not jeopardize the familial relationship.

Ethel felt her place was to take responsibility for those in the community as those in the community were there for her. Operating out of an ethic of care and responsibility (Gilligan, 1982), she was not only willing to engage children "who were having particular behaviour problems" (E-II-7) but acknowledged, "I didn't see that as something as only that parent had to deal with. I enjoyed going in and helping to be a part of that myself" (E-II-7). At the same time, she found "if I was having trouble with my child in the classroom...then I could ask other parents, could you check

on Jimmy today...and see if he needs any help" (E-I-34). Taking responsibility for individuals in the classroom extended beyond one's own child from Ethel's viewpoint. "If a child is having difficulty with a task, because I'm an adult and I'm more experienced then I'll be able to help them" (E-I-10). She was there for those who were having difficulty and needed an adult to help them deal with some task or other. Those that were in need received attention. "We didn't see it as I'm going in there to help my child. We'd go in there to help all of the kids...we felt very much like one big family" (E-I-34)--the family being the most interwoven and interconnected web of relationships. Being there as an available adult meant developing her relationships both with the children and with the larger community of parents whom Ethel entrusted with responsibility for her children's well being.

With her own children she enjoyed the time to "hear their joke" (E-I-26) while she was in the classroom with them. She was there as part of their daily lives and seeing how that went. The time with her own children was important, "It was kind of nice being with them in that way" (E-I-26).

For all three women being with their children in the classroom was an issue of trust. Ethel believed that all the parents were there for all the children not just their own. She could trust someone else to help her children if they were having a particularly tough day. Georgia was learning

to trust her children to be able to grow up and not need her care to the same extent, to be able to handle their own crises. Jo was going through a period of difficult transitions and needed to learn to trust herself as a parent after the anxiety of lengthy court proceedings. Being in the classroom appeared to be both involvement and letting go.

Ownership By Parents

I believe that ownership arises out of a sense of being empowered to affect your situation and being committed to bringing about that change. In that regard I was interested in what participants had to say about ownership of the classroom procedures by parents. I was guilty of introducing the word "ownership" into the interviews and, with hindsight, I think the theme could have emerged more authentically by simply asking the women to clarify parts of the first interviews which were references to the concept of ownership. Once I did introduce the term a complete range of responses was forthcoming.

Jo stated that when Ed was in the class "I used to think that I could direct things to some extent...a big part of that sense of ownership was the feeling that you had some control in the direction that the whole process was going to go" (J-II-5). And later:

> I always felt that if there was anything I

felt really strongly about it would happen. I mean I might have to take a bigger piece of making it happen because you were already tearing your hair out...but I always had a feeling that any idea was welcome. (J-II-13)

Jo was speaking of a sense of real power that she believed existed in the class. The structures had been developed within the community and the Parents' Meetings to provide her with a stage upon which she felt she could direct events. She also recognized her responsibility in making her vision come about. She was both understanding of the teacher's dilemma and willing to put her time and energy into creating the event she wanted. Jo's responsibility to the class in which her son was a member was consistent with her desire to be involved and to care for the world in a real way.

Georgia was very sure that she could make a difference in her children's lives and in the lives of others in the class with whom she worked. She had discovered the "strengthening" aspects of "empowering others" (Belenky, et al., 1986, p. 47). She took on responsibility in the classroom as she gained in personal strength and assurance. She could "be a part of it and particularly watch the kids change over the years" (G-I-16). She knew she was participating in what they were going through. She viewed simply being present as having worth. To be there and share in the memories was as valid, in fact maybe more valid, to her than helping a child

with a difficult math problem. Being present was the key for Georgia. She recalled she "felt comfortable with small groups of children so did a lot of small groups with Math and Reading" (G-I-24). As the weeks piled up, the individual activities became a blur. "I think I was on the executive in terms of meetings...and secretary, I took notes at the meetings" (G-I-24). It was not important what she did in particular, it was that she was there. "I liked to organize a lot of events, so there was field trips that I was involved in organizing" (G-I-24). This was all she could remember off hand. It was the process of the events caught her interest not the particulars.

> There was more to the events...they didn't just happen. There was some building up to an activity. There was the planning before. There was the activity and then there was the sort of evaluating afterward of it, or the discussion afterwards. (G-II-4)

Georgia immersed herself in the "how" of the events and did not remember the events themselves to a large extent. She felt herself to be active in the process of generating, creating, and evaluating the events that the class was involved in and remembered her sense of how that process felt--a trait of women who are discovering themselves as subjective knowers.

For Ethel, ownership meant "that I would have a chance to

be a part of making different what I wanted to see different" (E-II-11). Often that required speaking up in a parents' meeting or taking on some committee work. It also meant being in the classroom when there were conflicts and helping children "to work it out themselves" (E-II-6). What was significant for her was that she was not alone. There were others who could come in and take on part of the responsibility with her. "It wouldn't just be my problem, it wouldn't be just Jim's problem, it would be something that other parents would be willing to help with" (E-II-6). It was not simply the teacher and the parent who would engage, there were other adults there as well.

Ownership was part of the support that Ethel found so important. When she wanted further information on problems in the classroom, it was provided by the parents as well as by the teacher. There was a spirit of team building with a number of views and solutions to a problem being available from within the group. "We all valued whatever anyone could offer to the classroom" (E-II-8). The effort that it took to run an alternative class pulled everyone together. "Everyone kind of got...a chance to say...what we would like to do...as our contribution to the classroom. It was pretty clear that we needed everyone and that everyone had something to offer" (E-II-9).

The feeling of belonging to something unique stayed with people, as Jo had found after her son left the class. Ethel

noticed the same thing in friends she made, "I find that people who have left...the class still sort of feel a part of what's happening there" (E-II-4). Ownership was a feeling of belonging and taking responsibility for whatever you were able to do, a view consistent with her ethical position of care and responsibility. Jo, too, was taking on more responsibility. The class was a place where her ideas would be respected and acted upon. Georgia was present to participate in the process of how things happened. For all of them there was the belief that they influenced how things happened in the classroom and they were committed to being there.

Community

Jo spoke extensively of her sense of community. When she spoke of connectedness she was often speaking of community or of relationship. There was a multiplicity in her understanding of community. She had a unique view of the students in the class as a "classroom community" (J-I-41) that she could tap into as a visiting adult and from which she could draw strength. There was also "social interaction with the parents and the kids as well...it was certainly an extension of the classroom because it was after school hours" (J-II-6). The community that reached out after hours was the one from which Jo found new friends. The community was part

of the class but more. "That's what I liked about it, it was that it wasn't limited to what happens between nine and three-thirty" (J-II-6). And finally there was the purpose of the community: the education of its children by all members.

> I felt in the classroom that it was a totally community kind of thing. You know, if anyone felt really strongly about something, I mean, all you had to do was say that and...it would be acted upon in some way by the group...the much more co-operative, holistic approach to everything that happened. (J-II-6, 7)

There was the assurance that her passions and interests would not be ignored by the group. She expected to be heard and to be accepted by the others. As she said, she was "as dependent on the class as Ed was on her being there" (J-I-40). The group gave Jo the affirmation that she needed. She worked hard at connecting up with people in the class. By having "dinner back and forth, and parties, and just sort of another social life that developed as an extension of the classroom" (J-I-10) and by "chatting on the phone" (J-I-29) Jo made a deliberate effort to maintain contact and continue to be involved.

The original reason for the establishment of the community was an interest by parents to be more involved in their children's education. "That's where the whole sense of community came from...you know, you had a group of committed

parents and a group of kids and there was all this mutual benefit going on" (J-I-27). There was a focus to which everyone in the group could align themselves.

The class came along at the same time she was disconnecting from the life she had been living while she was married.

> I felt really disconnected with the life I'd lived before...there really is no one from that married part of my life for fourteen years...so I was feeling sort of adrift at the time...I just needed other people I could connect to. (J-I-10)

The class and it's community provided Jo with people to whom she could connect and a place to find herself again.

Georgia saw the gatherings at the bar as a chance to know the people she was involved with more fully; an enlarging of her own knowledge of them through the experience of sitting with them in a new setting. As she built upon her store of experiences, Georgia was able to understand more about these people: "people are different in their role as a committee member than when they're just in a social setting" (G-I-39). She did not go on to explain this difference but simply added "I learned a little bit more" (G-I-39).

From Georgia's experiences in common with people she learned about herself, but without developing intimate friendships she was not able to clearly articulate what such

meetings meant to her. The experience of being involved with the Parents' Meetings was not, for her, on an intimate, personal level but rather to enhance her knowing. "It's just another piece to help you connect with children, if you know a little bit about how their parents are and some interests of their parents" (G-I-32). She wanted experiences that made connections between what she already knew and what was unknown to her. Her understanding of the children could be enlarged by shared encounters with parents--those people who were the other part of the children's lives.

Georgia said that she did not have a need for intimate friends. She did not call upon those friends she had made when she was in the class (G-I-39) once her children were in their new school. She had moved on. She explained, "I guess one of the things I've learned is that things change, and sometimes you try and hang onto something that was really good for awhile and then...you can become disappointed" (G-I-39). As a subjective knower, Georgia was reaching into a future already in the making, cutting loose her attachment to a past that she felt finished with.

The community was the lifeblood of the class for Ethel. Her focus on the elements of support and how they worked found its fullest expression in her discussion of community.

> Community means to me giving support, having people in your life that share the same interests, that you feel are going in the

> same direction, whom you can turn to for support, who you can turn to just to have fun with and to share your time with and to who you can bounce things off of--the things you think about. (E-II-3)

If support for children and for each other was the backbone of the Alternative Class, then the community (at large) was the means by which such support was given. Support was sharing and having someone to turn to for any one of a myriad of reasons.

> You could say that the community sort of has its own identity. And it's created by...the opportunity to bounce off ideas off each other because we're all, you know, of like minds going in the same direction around wanting to be involved in our kids' education. (E-II-4)

At a time when Ethel was having difficulties in her own life, her marriage dissolving, her feelings about herself at an extreme low, and her old life disappearing, she found the community life of the class offered her "just a good opportunity for me to meet friends" (E-I-37). She appreciated the times "we would gather together...before the meeting or after the meeting and have some social time as well as the actual meeting" (E-I-36). It offered opportunities for her to make contact with people who shared her interests and valued what she had to offer. Those

opportunities were sometimes formal such as at the Parents' Meetings once a month or committee meetings, or they were informal such as "when you're dropping your kids off, or...when you're picking your kids up, and when you arrange lunch...or visiting tea times outside of the classroom...all those times when you spend talking with other parents" (E-II-4). The result was that she "made lots of friends in the classroom, and, yah, we'd meet for lunch or...go to parties together, or just get together and visit so the kids could play" (E-I-35). The community of the classroom formed the basis for a new social life for Ethel and her children. She found friends and a sense of fitting in with the class.

As the years passed, she was able to maintain and deepen those same relationships as she moved into her new life as a single mother. She could look to her new friends as "a support in our personal lives" (E-I-35). She found that "having known a parent for two or three years...and going through the school years together really made it nice because...you could be a lot more intimate in your relationships" (E-I-33). As Gilligan pointed out, the extension and development of the web of relationships is at the heart of a woman's morality and well being. Ethel was able to establish a new set of relationships as her marriage ended and use them as her new support system at a very low time in her life.

Yah, so by support, I guess I'm saying, we're

all on the same side, we're all working together, and we're all there for each other. Being there for each other, I guess that's what I'm trying to say. It's like, not only am I there for my child, I know all the parents are there for my child. (E-II-6)

Operating out of an ethic of care and responsibility, Ethel expected that those who had the most need would receive the response that would alleviate their suffering, even if it was herself or her children. Her examples confirmed and illustrated this view of the world, the community did take her and her children in and support them in their time of need.

Community in some sense affected all three women. Jo and Ethel were redefining their places in the world and changing their social relationships at the same time. They expressed great intensity of feeling when they discussed community. It was very real and close for these two women. Georgia was content to use the community as a tool to further her understanding of the children in the class and consequently spoke with less vehemence.

Communication

The theme of communication was divided into five sub-headings. They were parent to parent communication, parent

to child communication, parent to teacher communication, child to teacher communication, and child to child communication. Each sub-heading dealt with a kind of communication that one or more of the participants found relevant to their involvement in the classroom.

Parent to Parent Communication

Parent to parent communication was any occasion when parents were interacting. The gatherings after the Parents' Meetings were important times to socialize. So too were conversations started up while waiting to pick up children at the end of the day. Ethel spoke of the difference in the quality and spirit of these meetings from what she remembered and had experienced in the regular school system.

> In a regular classroom, I think...parents often talk to each other outside of the classroom and invite friends over and I think I probably could have had friendships that way. But it isn't, it isn't encouraged as much. So I would have had to seek it out a lot more. Where it was really easy to... like the parents spending time together and talking about things was a kind of a natural thing that happens... I don't ever remember, in all my school years,...going to an activity outside of the classroom where I met

other kids' parents and had a chance to socialize with other kids. (E-II-13)

The communication between parent and parent arose out of their mutual interests in the classroom, their children and their children's education.

Georgia used the other parents to get feedback on her daughter. Hearing what other parents had to say about Kim gave Georgia a clearer picture of her daughter. "Talking with other people, I realized, over time, that Kim probably lacks some confidence, but she was a lot more confident than I thought" (G-I-7). Such feedback helped Georgia make the separation that was coming about in her relationship with her daughter. It also helped her to have confidence in Kim and let her solve some of her own problems.

Since the class was voluntary and parents had to register their children it would be reasonable to expect a type of parent who was not satisfied with the status quo. Ethel was prepared for that difference, relating it to her passion for questions. "I expected to meet people that were asking lots of questions about their lives and about how their children will be educated...and talking about life rather than just going through life" (E-II-2). Such people were there for her. "That's what the majority of the parents were like, people who ask lots of questions" (E-I-38). And that in turn opened her up to the possibilities of new friends with a common interest. "So it was a good place, a good place for

me to meet people" (E-I-37).

Parent to Child Communication

Another major factor involved in the decision to become involved in the class was the development of parent to child communication. In some ways it would seem to be the reason for Georgia's participation in the class. Much of her communication was through shared experience. She believed it was important "to be able to understand how your child goes through a whole day" (G-II-9). And she found she had a great interest in "the social lives of kids and their emotional lives" (G-II-30). In the sense that communication is information passing between two individuals, watching children in their activities and in their interactions communicated to Georgia. It gave her the knowing about children that she was looking for.

Like Georgia, Jo was looking to compare her child with others in the class. Part of her sense of communicating with her son came from observing him while they participated in the classroom. Her need to be heavily involved in the class was significantly based on being with her son as often as possible while they made the adjustments to living together again, in the shadow of the divorce and the court proceedings against Ed's father. She was worried that "I had an emotional basket case on my hands" (J-I-26). She had to talk to others about him and she also had to be in the classroom

to see him against the background of the other children. She found she was getting "quite frustrated, especially if it was a time...when I wanted to work with another kid in the class...He wanted to have first dibs on Mom" (J-I-24). She endured annoying and frustrating behaviour from him in her attempt to get a clear picture of his emotional state.

Ethel came to the class with a strong philosophy of how adults should be with children and what the adult-child relationship should look like. Ethel believed that adults had a responsibility to affirm children's reality and belief in themselves and to find ways to help children get in touch with a sense of themselves.

> If I slow them down a little bit so that they have a chance to hear...their own words and to feel...their sense of themselves in their body...they too could feel that they have some control in the situations in the classroom. (E-II-25)

She had acquired this set of beliefs over a long and hard training period in social service agencies and she "wanted to test that out with my own kids...and to test it out in pieces of the classroom" (E-II-22). She wanted to try some of her newly won skills in a structured, safe environment with normal children, encouraging them to trust themselves.

A most powerful image of shared experience came from Georgia. A number of times she mentioned memories and the

making of memories. "I think some of the memories we have were so powerful, you know, the interactions were so powerful...you got to know the kids so strongly, so intimately, it's going to stay for quite a while" (G-II-23). Memories were those things they had in common, the details of life that they shared, that gave their personal histories meaning. In a subjective sense they were the pictures of their internal lives. Each of them had her own unique but overlapping set of memories. The common memories provided a kind of deep connectedness that spoke of having been together over time, providing reference points to the relationships. The sharing of experience became the mutual currency of dialogue. In her subjective world each person's experience was her own--the ultimate relativism. Shared memories bridged the difficulty of verbalizing experience.

Georgia went even further in one particularly intense image. "If I were to die I know my kids would be really confident with the memories that we have, that I know that I couldn't have really given too much more in terms of what I gave to them" (G-II-18). She had provided them with a base for their lives, she had done the very best she could, and her children would be confident and capable in the world with the strength that those memories would give to them even without her. I felt Georgia's explanation reflected some of the "existential loneliness" that Belenky et al. speak of (1986, p. 84) in the subjectivist's stance. It is sometimes

too far to reach to the experience of the other and we are left alone in the universe.

Parent to Teacher Communication

The relationship with myself as the teacher was unique in terms of parent to teacher communication. Reporting was no longer a passive event but took on the elements of a discussion where both of us had observed the same behaviours.

Jo was quite candid about her approach to communication with me. She called it "talking your ear off every chance I got" (J-I-23). She had a history of disappointment and discomfort with schools reporting of Ed's development. She recalled his first year in school when she received a "two line evaluation" (J-II-36) given by a teacher who "I didn't feel was comfortable talking to me as a parent about how my son was doing" (J-I-36). When Ed was in the Alternative Class in Toronto, Jo was denied the right to visit him in the classroom. The effect on her was to build mistrust.

> I didn't trust the teacher's opinion particularly because I didn't feel I could get close to him. You know, like I didn't feel I could develop any kind of rapport... cause what I was seeing of Ed he was a basket case...he was lost in the crowd. (J-II-36)

The elements of trust and rapport were crucial for Jo to believe what the teacher had to say. If she could not feel

any sense of closeness, any sense of being connected, then she could not trust. Without a mechanism for building rapport, a place where contact could be made between herself and the teacher, Jo simply discounted the teacher's evaluation of her son.

Child to Teacher Communication

Child to teacher communication in the classroom centered around the issues of discipline and control. Ethel reflected on Jimmy.

> I was worried about how the discipline problems would be handled in the regular system. I was worried that my children wouldn't get the attention that they needed to help them resolve difficulties that they were having that were resulting in a behaviour problem in the classroom. (E-I-8)

Specifically, Jimmy was being "kind of difficult to get along with" (E-I-8). With parent volunteers in the Alternative Class Ethel was hoping that Jimmy would get the additional attention that she felt he needed.

The teacher's role was also an issue with Georgia. She felt that Kim's experience of her nursery school teachers was "more of the teachers controlling the environment" (G-I-8). The shift in Georgia's thinking was that "maybe they shouldn't...step in and control so much" (G-I-8). Teacher-

child communication was in many instances in nursery school about a discipline problem that needed to be settled. Behaviour was seen as the root problem. Georgia shifted the focus away from a comparison of children's actions with codes of behaviour towards an examination of the relationships children had with each other and how they could be encouraged and aided by the teacher to resolve differences.

Child to Child Communication

Observing child to child communication meant learning how children relate in their own terms.

Although it was fine in its time, the ideals of pre-school education were no longer what Georgia had in mind for her oldest daughter. "Well, in nursery school settings too often they learn so much about co-operation and sharing and getting along...so there wasn't a lot of time for negative interaction to happen. She didn't get a lot of experience that way" (G-I-7). What Georgia was looking for was a place where her daughter, a shy, little girl, could experience a full range of relationships and be secure enough to learn the skills to deal with them. She saw the Alternative Class as a place where "adults are aware but they [the kids] are allowed to work it out" (G-II-26). In the adult awareness and in their being present the issue of safety was assured.

Having committed herself to letting the children handle their conflicts and remain an observer she was excited by

what she learned about children. "Kids learned how to socialize and it was their little world and they learned how to control it themselves" (G-I-8). This spoke of growing confidence in the abilities of children to handle their own world and by implication included confidence in her own children.

Georgia observed conflicts and had her share of time intervening. She learned how to encourage children to work out their own conflicts and she made some startling discoveries for herself by observation and experience. "The other thing I'd never seen was the role of the--how the victim was often the more aggressive one" (G-II-25). In her watching how children interact she saw how the smaller child would gain the attention of the older. "I would watch that in some of the boys that would constantly physically antagonize others, and then, you know, the older boys who had everything under control might lash out finally. But the child who had instigated it always knew that" (G-I-10). Having come to trust that she acquired knowledge through experience and observation, Georgia was able to draw conclusions that would seem to fly in the face of common knowledge. She discovered the pull and tug between older and younger children and how the younger members wanted their share of attention from the older ones. "If they weren't getting enough attention then they would get it negatively from their peers" (G-I-11). And she learned to appreciate how

that happened.

Another issue was the role that each student played in the "family" of the class. Georgia saw that the roles were picked by the children.

> One of the biggest things I learned was that there's a role to play for every child in the group. And some kids fall into their roles and they're happy with it even if it's the role of something that we as adults might perceive as being a negative role. It's their role and they're comfortable. And that's where they fit and everyone else in the group wants that to be the child's role too, it just seems to fit. Whereas often what adults do is they don't want certain children to play certain roles so they step in and guide or deal with it or re-route it. (G-I-8)

Georgia found interference by adults to run contrary to the learning that was taking place for the children as they defined themselves in their own social context. She discovered that children were communicating even in their conflicts, and she came to believe that adults had "to allow those roles to take place by allowing kids to have conflict so that leaders emerged and followers emerged" (G-I-9). Then everyone was included in the play. Gilligan (1982) has stated how important the concept of inclusion is to female

moral development. Georgia interpreted her observations of children through her own moral and ethical window rather than through knowledge she acquired from other voices including her training at college. She heard her own voice rising out of her growing consciousness of herself as a learner.

Communication between the various parties in the class was a means by which connectedness was achieved. Five main sub-themes of communication were identified for the women in the study. What is relevant is how communication was a means by which personal growth and development took place. In the interactions between the different people in the class, personal realities were transformed. Communication was a means of change.

The Teacher Assistant Role

All three women went into the class with the expectation that they would be volunteering in the classroom. It was part of the philosophy of the class that each parent put in some time either in the class itself or on the evening committees. The assumption was that there would always be at least one adult in the classroom besides the teacher. Activities could range from one-to-one reading to presentation of a craft activity to directing the whole class. Volunteers related to that expectation in their own

ways.

Jo felt that she "wasn't really good at instigating stuff" (J-I-8) but that she "was better at planning things" (J-I-8) and she "could sort of organize" (J-I-8). She "really enjoyed the planning sessions...those lunch time meetings that we had" (J-I-8). Those lunch time meetings were later moved to the monthly Parents' Meeting in the evenings so that more people could participate, but they were the beginnings of parent participation in curriculum planning.

Seeing herself as a planner and not an instigator, Jo developed a teaching assistant role for herself. "I think a lot of the time I followed your lead" (J-I-45). One example she gave was during Creative Writing:

> When I first went into the classroom and a kid came up to me and said, how do you spell "amber", I just would have told him. And I think after watching you...my response would be, how do you think you spell it? (J-I-46)

Jo was sensitive to the subtleties of teaching in that she recognized the difference between the two approaches.

Her appreciation of the children came through in remembering some of the stories they wrote the previous year, "Lois had a cat story, about cats and spaceships" (J-I-33) and recalled, "we wrote them all out...they'd do their little illustrations around their story and I had a really good time doing that" (J-I-33). It gave her some sense of place and

purpose. "I felt I was another teacher in the classroom" (J-I-34). Jo saw herself developing a kind of second place next to the teacher, "some of them figured out that if you were busy with somebody else they could come and talk to me" (J-I-35). Someone who could be there when someone was needed and the teacher was not available was part of her role.

Georgia's understanding of her role as a volunteer in the classroom evolved out of her sense of connectedness with the children in the class. When asked how a typical day went, she answered, "coming in and sitting on the floor, maybe trying to pick some kids who just looked a little off by themselves or maybe wanting someone to sit with them" (G-I-25). Rather than looking to the lesson or the materials that would be used for teaching, she utilized the first few minutes of classroom routine, the chart story time, to decide which children need some special time, or a listening ear. Out of her sense of connectedness she defined her role as one who was available. "Sometimes I found that some of the kids were having just a hard time with--anything" (G-I-27). Having found a child with a need she took responsibility for "just sitting quietly with them and talking a little bit in just little sentences" (G-II-31). Operating from the moral imperative of responsibility and care, it was reasonable for her, as the adult in the situation, to be where the need was greatest. "Cause I guess they're hurting and you kind of want to offer them some kind of support" (G-I-34). It was

evident that she was operating out of a great sense of morality and responsibility, "not just for my own kids. I was really interested to see how the other children were growing" (G-I-29). As Gilligan has defined female moral development, Georgia continually enlarged her web of individual children she cared for in the class.

Curriculum was not an issue for her. She did not see that as her role. When it did gain mention it was in passing, secondary to other things. "I often went off with the Kindergarten group and did a variety of activities with them, sand and water and painting" (G-I-32). She did not spend all her time administering to the emotional needs of troubled children either. "I enjoyed spending time with them [other kids] and I enjoyed helping them with their academic work" (G-II-32). There was an excitement for Georgia in helping children figure things out.

Ethel went in "a half day a week and sometimes twice a week" (E-I-9). Her contribution was significant. She had a clear picture of her role in the classroom as the helper. "Well, it was expected that the parent volunteer would assist each of the children in the class to do some reading to an adult as part of the morning routine" (E-I-13). However, she found that there were special areas that soon caught her attention and she began to concentrate her energy on those while performing her routine tasks.

But personally I chose to try and make contact

with as many children as I could and if there were any children having a particular problem I would purposely sit a little longer and spend a little longer with that child. (E-I-13)

Ethel found her interest lay in helping children with their problems and simply being with them as someone who would listen to them when they needed it. "I might even sit there for a couple of minutes and...I might even ask them...Is there something that you want me to help you with?" (E-I-15). The role of the parent was subtle and accepting of what the child had to offer; it was not to be the teacher over again, but to be a friend and ally as well, to be there if there was a need.

For Ethel, the role of the teacher assistant was not to make judgements for the child, but rather to simply be there as someone who could be depended upon and trusted. She used the term "available adult" which I asked her to define.

> An available adult in the classroom doesn't have an agenda. You don't go in there and say specifically, this is what I'm going to do with the kids today...You might be working on a science project or...they might have cut their finger last night and nobody's had a chance to listen to them, you know, and say, "Oh, yah, how did you do that? And did it hurt"? (E-II-19)

The one-to-one contact took the form of entering into the personal lives of the children in a non-intrusive way. The children learn how to trust the adults in their lives. "When the adults are in the classroom and the children go to them and are heard and responded to, then they...experience that as, yah, these adults are here for me" (E-II-20).

Ethel was particularly strong in her views of how to be with children. She had a fine sense of how to reach into children's inner selves and be comfortable with them there. "I often had to ask myself the question, well if I was eight-years-old and I was acting like that, why would I be acting like that?" (E-II-32). In her role as a teacher's aid, Ethel used empathy skills to put herself as close as she could into the child's place while still maintaining herself as an adult in the total situation. In many ways, when it came to entering into the child's world, she was the most fearless of the three participants I interviewed.

Each woman developed a role which fit with her view of what children needed in school. They had come to the class out of a strong image of how adults should be with children. Jo wanted to be another teacher. Ethel and Georgia wanted to offer children some support. By volunteering in the classroom they had an opportunity to try different roles until they found which fit with their belief systems.

If It Doesn't Work

Ethel was pragmatic when it came to selecting the Alternative Class for her children. When Jimmy was first enroled she was doing it merely as an experiment. She adopted a wait and see attitude that seemed typical of many parents and was certainly articulated by Georgia. She kept her options open where her children were concerned. "I guess Jim was just in Kindergarten and it was like, if it didn't work out you could easily go back into the regular system" (E-II-10). Ethel was looking at how her child responded to the class, not whether or not it was most satisfactory for herself.

This theme accounts, to some degree, for Georgia's comfort with the changes she was making. Rather than being overwhelmed with the totality of the change in the relationship with her children, and of the change in her very way of being with children generally, she seemed to eagerly embrace the newness of it. "I wasn't worried about what if I try her and it's really awful--I'm stuck. I just thought I'll try her and if it doesn't work then I'll try something else" (G-I-6). "That's what life is all about...it's just a series, a whole series of routes and it can change at any time" (G-I-22). With life constantly shifting in a subjective universe, Georgia provided herself with a coping mechanism to enable her to choose from the "series of routes"

(G-I-22). It was then easy enough to try on new philosophies or even a new type of schooling for her children.

Ethel recognized that she could come and go as she pleased but she remained firmly focused on the needs of her children, the task of educating them in what she believed to be the environment that best suited them.

Georgia left herself a back door in her commitment; she would try the class out and but gave herself permission to leave if it did not work out. That attitude left her a lot of room to manoeuvre--she could try out all sorts of ideas or ways of relating and walk away from those that did not provide success. It was a safety net that reduced the impact of failure.

Affirmation

Much of what was happening for the three women was affirmation on a personal level, affirmation of the rightness of their belief system and of their moral framework. Volunteerism allows for moral growth because it is unattached to job-related reward systems, money or influence. (Boards are not true volunteerism in that board members do not usually have contact with the clients.) Jo, Georgia and Ethel needed the presence of others who were sympathetic to, or even engaged in, processes similar to their own. The structures of the Alternative Class evident in the previous

themes provided opportunity for affirmation with the resultant personal growth. All three women were very much aware of something larger than volunteering having taken place for them.

Jo realized that her involvement with the Alternative Class was a part of something more than simply going into her son's class as a volunteer. It connected to other things in her life at the time. She discovered that she was "as dependent on the class as Ed was dependent on me being there" (J-I-40).

Part of what the class offered was a chance to connect with new people, people with whom she had something in common through her son. After the divorce she needed to develop a new life for herself and for her children. For her it was a transition period; she could plunge into new things with great enthusiasm and energy. Her life had taken a dramatic and liberating leap in one sense and a frightening plunge in another sense. After fourteen years of marriage, the last six in one house, she was thrust into a world of court appearances, legal fees, mortgage payments and constant negotiations for child support. She faced the familiar story of poverty and lack of marketable job skills after years of child rearing and being at home. Her self-esteem was extremely low. "I needed some kind of affirmation that I was not a bad person [laughing]" (J-I-39). To develop some sense of herself and what she was capable of as a person, as a

mother, and as an adult member of society became very important, doubly so after she gained custody of her children.

> I think at that time I needed to find out what I could do because all my life up to that point I had this feeling deep down that I was capable of, if not great things, certainly different things and probably a few of them. But I hadn't ever had a real chance to find out. So I think, at that time I was having a sort of a Great Experiment for me. I'll just try everything and see what I'm good at. If in fact I'm good at anything at all [laughing]. (J-I-44)

So Jo was everywhere at once in her Great Experiment.

Georgia was very concerned that as her children matured she would lose the relationship that she had had with them when they were younger and she was not sure she could accept whatever would take the place of such a relationship. "I can remember stating many times that I would be kind of disappointed when the kids got beyond that age [five-years-old]" (G-II-5). What she was looking for was some sense of the larger picture as they grew up and became more independent. "And what I saw in the classroom by having that big broad range, was tne way that they develop from pre-school into six, seven, eight-year-olds...and the kinds of

neat things you can do with them" (G-II-5). The class confirmed for her in a real way that her children would still need her involvement even as they passed into the school years, five-years-old and on up. Georgia was able to see the other children and interact with them in the classroom setting and get a feel for the way her children would be when they were that age.

Ethel wanted to explore her own understanding of education. She wanted to involve herself in active pursuit of her own questions and interact with other adults who were asking the same kinds of questions. She wanted to "get in touch with [her] own questions around education...about why things are the way they are and how things could be different" (E-I-10), but when she became involved with the class something developed that she had not anticipated. There was a step by which she was no longer simply seeking answers for herself but began to see how the children were developing through the same process. "It was just a lot of fun to sit there with the kids and watch them start to find their own questions, you know" (E-I-11). Out of her own work in personal development, Ethel was finding what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule (1986) call connected knowing.

As she felt that her schooling offered her little opportunity to form questions and to find the answers for herself, Ethel was determined to seek out the situations where that was possible for her own children. In doing so

she began to understand when the learning was the children's experience and not her giving it to them. "On some level they would say, oh, I learned that you could sort shells by smooth ones and rough ones, rather than--Ethel told me today that some shells are smooth and some shells are rough" (E-I-18). It was important to her "that they feel that they answer their own questions rather than somebody else who knows it all telling them the answer" (E-I-18).

All three women were concerned with the building of confidence for their children, but Georgia expressed it most forcefully. She believed that children needed a secure environment to build confidence. When they felt secure they were willing to take risks and explore their surroundings. This was very much in line with current educational theory. At the heart of her belief in confidence building was what she called the "foundation", built out of childhood experiences.

> As I said, for me, if you can give a child a really strong foundation of feeling confident, not being afraid to make mistakes, and being able to relate socially, then anything on top of that in academics is secondary and is easy to handle. (G-I-20)

In theory, you built this confidence by establishing "some really solid, secure, happy times in your childhood that seems to carry right through into your adulthood" (G-II-13).

The child is mother of the woman, to paraphrase Wordsworth (My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold). It was critically important for the child to be confirmed in her worth and ability especially in relationships. "And the way you learn in those first ten years to interact with kids and everything, if you're socially fairly secure, that's just, to me, so important"(G-II-13).

Like all parents, Georgia had asked herself what kind of future is out there for today's children. She defined security in relationships as "being part of the group and not being afraid to express anything you're feeling...whether you want to do th.ngs with the group or not" G-II-13,14). She expected that there would be difficult decisions ahead for her children but she was looking to the experiences of a secure childhood to hold them in good stead. Having had security in their early relationships, she hoped her children would develop the confidence to take risks and make mistakes, but also to be able to sensibly say no when it would be required. "So I think if you can get through a series of smaller, but fairly important childhood mishaps and you work through them, as opposed to having someone fix it...come the next time, they're not as upset" (G-II-16).

The philosophy of the class fit her philosophy of what education should be doing for her children and gave her confidence in her beliefs. She was able to expand on those beliefs and define them more clearly, "I always felt that

people needed to be confident and they didn't need to do well academically to do well in life" (G-I-20). While academics alone can give "early confidence" (G-I-20) , she felt that "if they have confidence based on a variety of other things then it's more secure" (G-I-20). Confidence and security go hand in hand and have a more far-reaching effect than academics alone.

As a footnote to the academic success that did come to both her children in their school careers, both during and after their participation in the Alternative Class, Georgia explained, "If you're feeling good about yourself and you're feeling good about school then people like you and you like going there; then the academics will just come naturally" (G-I-20).

Having confidence in themselves and the decisions that they made was an issue for all three women. How they dealt with their search for confidence reflected their motivation for putting their children in the class.

Many women see their strength as being in the role of helper, in the sense of making a difference in the world by making things happen for someone who is in need. (Belenky, et al., 1986). Georgia had spent much of her life working with and for young children. As her oldest daughter grew beyond Georgia's store of accumulated knowledge of younger children, she had to rely on something more than the words of others; she had to be confirmed in the rightness of her own views and

beliefs. "I think I just learned so much...from watching them and from watching myself [emphasis mine]. It taught me to be, like broader in my approach to looking at things" (G-I-47). If her children were growing beyond the knowledge that she had been taught, then she had to find some other way of making her decisions. The confirmation of the rightness of this new direction she was taking she found in being in a classroom with "six, seven, eight-year-olds" (G-II-5). Here she was able to make decisions for a wide variety of ages and stages.

While the children in the class were not the little ones she was used to dealing with, her skills were still applicable. Georgia could trust herself to make proper decisions even though there had been a shift in how she worked with children. "I know that some of the things I used to feel like doing was to fix it for them, and now I fix it with them" (G-II-16). There is a sense of moving from a position of the child watching the adult perform for the child, to a sharing in a more face-to-face manner, a new form of relationship.

Jo, too needed to be reassured that she could make correct judgements. While she spoke lightly about the divorce at times in the interview, she acknowledged that it had been a struggle. She kept up "a good front" (J-I-43) while her "greatest fear in life is that somebody's going to uncover you for a charlatan" (J-I-43) "A fear that they will find

out that I am not as great or as capable as they think I am" (J-I-44). Jo had no reference points to direct her; she relied on her ability to pretend and fool those around her to get her by--despite the fact that she could not think of even one time when she had "botched it" (J-I-44).

Her lifestyle changed after that first year. Struggling with the fear that she would be discovered as a charlatan diminished.

> I look back on what I was doing then, you know, in school and working a job, in the classroom and going to all kinds of other meetings, and you know, the thing with the Board at St. Lawrence. I was going like stink all the time. I don't think I could do it now. You know. Maybe I don't want to do it. Maybe I don't need to do it now...I think I got to the point where I was feeling that...I was trying everything and not being as good as I could have been if I'd just sort of narrow it down somewhat. (J-I-44, 45)

The need to be on the go all the time, of trying everything, was part of the process of remaking herself as a single mother with dependent children. As she made connections with people around her and found her place in her various circles, she was able to focus on those things which would become stabilizing elements--her house, her new friends

and her job. By the second year Jo was not as involved with the class and had been able to gain some perspective on her son as their relationship re-established itself.

At the point when Ethel first became interested in the class, she admitted "I was suffering from depression and low self-esteem and lack of confidence" (E-II-12). The road back to emotional well-being brought her to the conclusion that "if you really trust yourself and you really listen to yourself, then you'll go the direction that you need to go" (E-II-22). Her involvement with the class gave her a chance to "test that out with my own kids" (E-II-22). In regards to learning, she carried that thinking through to "kids probably process best academically if they're allowed to follow themselves" (E-II-36). In that sense the classroom became confirmation of the personal growth that she was going through; it gave her a place to develop and work through her new ideas in a non-threatening environment. Out of this Ethel "gained a lot of confidence in trusting myself" (E-II-23) and "wanted to share that with the kids" (E-II-25).

In the process of starting from a place of very low self-esteem to having enough confidence in herself and trusting her "own instincts" (E-II-23), Ethel found with the children a place where she could open up and allow those growing skills a chance to develop.

> The classroom gave me an opportunity to find out who I already was...being with the kids and

> allowing myself to feel that child-like person inside of me, I could start to get back in touch with what do I think. (E-II-31)

In even stronger terms she said, "I let myself come alive in the classroom" (E-II-34).

As the classroom gave each woman a place where she could develop her beliefs about being with children and how children should be treated it also became a testing ground for some very basic changes in how to parent or how to be with children as a responsible adult.

Georgia had been looking for a Kindergarten class for her daughter, Kim, "where it would draw her out a little more" (G-I-4). Her feeling was that her daughter was "shy and not able to stand up for herself" (G-I-7). She wanted her to get some confidence and be able to stand up for herself. As an example, one of the rough little boys in the kindergarten group, Jerry, had taken to hitting Kim. What his motives were went unsaid. What was interesting to Georgia was that when Kim, after discussing the issue with her mother and father at home, came to me the next day in the classroom, I said that she needed to confront Jerry by telling him that he hurt her. My rationale was that I would not always be around to rescue her (G-I-14).

Kim did confront Jerry and he stopped hitting her. For Georgia, this was exactly the reason that she had put Kim into the class. She pointed out the consequences if I had

solved the problem for Kim.

> That fear would always be there, not knowing how to handle it, that fear of not being able to control the situation. And that was a real, really big step for her coming home that night. It had a big impact on letting her control her own. And really encouraging that in her, really having her speak up if someone is on her case and handling it herself. (G-I-15)

Georgia was confirmed in her choice of classes in that Kim was encouraged to take on conflicts on her own and speak up. To further emphasize the importance of this particular bit of conflict resolution, Georgia pointed out that Kim went on to develop a "relationship" with Jerry "that went beyond that, because she dealt with it" (G-I-15). As important as the resolution of the conflict was to Georgia's view of her oldest daughter, it was even more important that she was able to maintain a relationship and move beyond the fight.

Georgia gained confidence in her daughter. She came to believe that "she needs not to grow up in a perfect life" (G-II-10). It became as important to Georgia to be able to let go and allow Kim to have her knocks as it was for Kim to gain her own confidence as a result of resolving conflicts with other children on her own. There was a tight dance that happened between mother and daughter; as Kim became more confident of herself in the world, Georgia felt secure in

letting her take on more. It is as though they both had to move beyond Kim being a shy and withdrawn five-year-old and they had to do it together. Georgia explained this emotional see-saw as, "I guess I wouldn't be that confident if I'm worried about their confidence" (G-I-13).

When her children moved back into the neighbourhood school the teachers mentioned to Georgia that her children "seem fairly confident" (G-II-11). It confirmed what she had already observed, that her children were ready to go into the mainstream. "They're confident enough now that they can deal with that, they can handle it" (G-I-43). By watching her children Georgia was confirmed in the beliefs she held about how her children should be educated. She also learned to trust her children in the world and to let them have their rough spots. She came to the realization that there would be many places where she could be part of their lives when they moved beyond the infant and toddler ages, beyond five-years-old. Actively participating in the weekly routine of the classroom gave her a new perspective on herself.

Ethel also was able to enjoy herself with the children and to feel that she was needed by them. Her skills and knowledge were sought out.

> I enjoyed being with the kids...it's been so long since I was little , so it was neat to be with kids and just get a sense of what it's like to be six years old and how their world

looks. (E-I-24)

Her view of the interactions within the class were framed within an empathetic understanding. She was prepared to go to the six-year-old's view of the world and enjoy herself there. She not only believed the six-year-old had her own view of the world but she trusted that she would enjoy sharing that view.

"I felt needed, and I felt wanted, and I felt liked by the kids...that was a bonus for me. Plus...I liked being able to help" (E-I-25) Her satisfaction in being needed and sought out for what she had to give expressed a perception of the world that focused on others' needs and the ability to respond in the terms sought by the other. In Lyons' (1988) analysis of Gilligan's work she defined those individuals who demonstrated such an empathetic view as working out of a morality of response and care.

Like Georgia, and Jo, Ethel recalled instances of children coming rushing to greet her at the door, further confirming their liking and trusting of her.

> When I would come into the classroom there would be kids who would acknowledge that I had come into the classroom and say hello and come over and start showing me maybe a toy or something they'd brought from home, or start telling me about something. (E-I-25)

That the children would come from where they were to make

contact was confirmation that "kids like having adults in the classroom" (E-I-25). It was an endorsement of parents being involved in the classroom, part of the philosophy of the class to which Ethel had committed her loyalty and her children's education.

Another critical aspect of the class was the issue of parents supporting one another. If the class was to establish a community of parents supporting the community of children--a concept expressed most lucidly by Jo--then the parents were also there to support one another in this endeavour. Ethel said, "I really felt supported by the other parents...I could ask other parents, could you check on Jimmy today?" (E-I-34).

For Ethel, the trust that developed between parents who were sharing responsibility for each other's children was a building block for forming friendships outside the classroom as it had been for Jo. "I found too, that I have a lot more friends than I ever had because I was meeting people...people that had similar interests to mine" (E-I-37). That these people were "people who ask a lot of questions" (E-I-38) was of importance in forming friendships.

For these three women affirmation was the key to building confidence in their judgements. They actively sought out situations where they could test themselves and their emerging belief systems with both adults and children. Each of them expressed a change in their relationship with their

own children. Jo had her children returned to her. Georgia's children were entering the middle years of childhood. Ethel's children were living through a divorce. These three mothers were having to change fundamental aspects of their relationships with their children and were looking to find support in that endeavour from membership in the Alternative Class.

Change

Change is the final theme. Each woman was able to articulate significant changes that had taken place over the time that she had been involved with the class. Change included change of circumstances, changes in their views of themselves, of their children, and in how one acts in the world, change in their roles as mothers, change in their views of education, and in their views of children and conflict. In fact, all three women were in the throes of change when they enroled their children in the Alternative Class. In the class they found the structures that encouraged their personal growth and supported their changes.

Change of Circumstances

Jo had been out of the class for a year at the time of the interview. She said that she missed it. "You never get the same kind of feeling for what's going on in the classroom or

what your child is learning if you're not in the classroom" (J-I-22). Although she sounded nostalgic for the way it had been, she was not sure that she wanted to go back to that. The change was more than her living circumstances, it was also in her attitude. She admitted that Ed said he missed having her come into his class, but she wondered if he would be comfortable with Mom coming in. "He'd find it embarrassing...just cause of the age he is...cause boys don't do that [said with gentle humour]" (J-I-23). Circumstances changed for her. Jo was working in town and did not have the time to get into Ed's class even if she wanted to.

Change in One's View of Oneself

Ethel felt that the class was not the agent of change, but it was a means of measuring changes that were going on for her, dramatic personal changes that affected the entire framework of her life.

> It was '86...I was standing back from myself and taking a look at, you know, how normal am I? And I was starting to see that, you know, that I--not that I wasn't normal, but that I was suffering from depression and from low self-esteem and lack of confidence. (E-II-12)

These were critical issues for her and were to precipitate her leaving her marriage, taking a new job, and establishing her own home with her children. She was concerned that her

children "didn't also suffer from depression" (E-II-12). Being there for her children in school and having other adults there to provide similar support were part of her motivation for entering into the class. Another reason was that she attributed some of her problems to the indifference of the system that she had experienced as a student and she was determined to keep her children from that experience for as long as possible.

The class helped Ethel to connect with the world again as she worked her way through the depression. Children were a safe place for her to take personal risks and enjoy a joke or a word of sympathy. "I felt needed, and I felt wanted and I felt liked by the kids and, you know, that was a bonus for me. Plus I liked being there...I liked being able to help" (E-I-25). Her movement through her personal changes was enhanced in the class by the feeling that she had a place where she would be accepted and taken in.

Over the five years since she had first enroled her children in the Alternative class, much had changed. Her work had taken her away from the classroom and economic realities limited her time as they did for Jo. "I'm finding that a lot more difficult that I don't ...drop the kids off in the morning and pick them up at night" (E-I-28). She would like to "be able to hang around for five minutes or so before I went to work" (E-I-28). Those few minutes would put her back in touch with her children's daily life in a way

that dropping them off at eight-thirty could not do. Missing the involvement seemed to be a common theme with the other women as well.

All three participants were aware of many fundamental, personal changes. That awareness became part of the interview process.

Jo became aware of possibilities, even lost opportunities, those things which she once did not believe herself capable of doing. "If I had the time and the money and all the good stuff I'd probably go to a B. of Ed." (J-I-38). She saw teachers as being in a powerful position. "I still believe, probably naively, that you can make an impact" (J-I-38). She came to see herself as an assistant teacher in the classroom and included in her view the possibility of herself having her own class. "If I were a teacher, I would probably sit somewhere in between you and the teacher Ed has this year" (J-I-38). She even picked out the age and grade that she liked, "I don't think I really could cope with anything older than...Grade 5" (J-I-38). Jo's new picture of herself was as someone who could become a professional teacher, someone who had the talent to be with children and teach them. She came to believe herself capable of achieving that. Although she "always felt very intimidated going into new and different situations" (J-I-9) she found that being in the class developed her confidence. She was able to make herself available to those who wanted help publishing a story or who

wanted to learn to sew a blanket stitch. Her picture of her own capabilities expanded. When I asked her if the "faking it" feeling was still with her, Jo replied, "No. I don't think so...I think I worked through in two years stuff I'd been building up for twenty" (J-II-40).

Change in the View of One's Children

Georgia acknowledged that her changes were propelled by events that involved her children, but the changes were within herself. "I guess one of the things I've learned is that things change" (G-I-39). That was important to her. She went into the class wanting "to be a part of watching them, all of them, sort of change and grow " (G-I-29,30). The process of participating in the growth and learning of children, even those other than her own, was a motivator to keep Georgia coming out every week for three years. She appreciated "a sense of progression or change or anything, just being there physically seeing it" (G-I-17). Change attracted her as did the children themselves and their lives. She confessed that insight did not come to her in a flash but developed as she worked with the children. That is part of how change took place for her--a developing kind of thing. Later she spoke of coming to terms with physical conflict among some of the boys, "then after a couple of months when I saw things starting to work, then gaining more and more and more confidence in that way of being with kids...then the

second year I felt really comfortable" (G-II-24). With time came the gains and the insights for her.

Georgia understood the nature of how her change came about through watching the children in the class and testing her theories against them. "I think I just learned so much...from watching them and from watching myself...I think it taught me to be...broader in my approach to looking at things" (G-I-47). And Georgia understood, too, that it came to an end for her when the "missing piece" (G-II-33), the "block" (G-II-33) about her children growing into middle childhood, fell into place.

Ethel saw her children change during the course of their schooling in the Alternative Class. "I've noticed when Jimmy is having conflict...with other children...that he doesn't seem to have any difficulty articulating what the issue is for him" (E-I-28). One of the reasons that Ethel had put Jimmy into the class was that she was worried about his aggressive behaviour with other children, so the change was appreciated by her. It confirmed for her that the things she believed in were affective in the world.

Change in How One Acts in the World

Ethel believed the greatest changes that took place were in herself.

> If I describe myself when I first came into the classroom, I had a low self-esteem, I didn't

> have any confidence, I didn't feel like I had anything to contribute to the classroom, I felt uneducated, and I felt very shy and quiet and very intimidated by other people, seeing other people as...being more important, having more to offer...Where now I feel like an equal with the other adults...I feel competent in myself. I like myself. I feel that I have, I feel that I have learned a lot of things in the classroom that, µm, that I feel comfortable now taking a stand on. (E-II-30)

Part of her search was being able "to get in touch with my own questions around education...and how things could be different" (E-I-10). She discovered ways she could interact with children in the classroom environment that made a difference. Over a period of years her questioning techniques were developed into a sophisticated part of her being with children. She was learning to ask questions that were both her own and yet were also tied to the learning of the children with whom she was working. She was finally getting to ask her own questions about education.

Change in Roles

The emotional development of their children was very important to these mothers. It was related to their own self confidence as mothers and as individuals having knowledge.

Jo became much more certain of her ability as a mother to judge the well-being of her son and to support him emotionally. Ed, the son she had once referred to as a basket case, was able to go into a regular classroom. "He handled it like a piece of cake" (J-II-26). The need to have her judgements confirmed or reframed was no longer an issue. During her two years in the class she made the transition to a place of subjective authority in dealing with her relationships and she became more certain of her competence to care responsibly. .

> I think my attitudes to a lot of things changed around that time. Certainly a lot of things that I had been thinking about for a long time solidified around that time too... I think around a lot of moral issues. I had always, prior to that time, been pretty loose about right, wrong, and grey areas. I think I became a lot more solid. I defined things that were no longer okay, on many levels, socially and...in all kinds of different ways. (J-I-46)

Change in One's View of Education

Jo's view of teachers changed as well. She still believed that some teachers should be removed from the classroom because they were not good for children, but on the whole

"the whole process made me a lot more sympathetic to the stresses of being in the classroom" (J-I-29). Her changed outlook permitted Jo to let her son go into the mainstream system with a better understanding of what the process of education was meant to be and of what her own power as a parent was.

Change in One's View of Children and Conflict

The change Georgia saw in her children was most clear when she said of Kim, "I always thought of her as shy" (G-I-7). She repeated that several times in various forms. Later in the same interview she confirmed that she no longer saw her as shy but "quiet"(G-I-17) and with "a confidence there" (G-I-7). Georgia's concern for her daughter's inability to stick up for herself faded as she saw her interacting with the other children in the class. In the fight with Jerry, and it's resolution, Georgia came to believe fully that she had to let Kim take that "really, really big step" (G-I-15) and let her "control her own" (G-I-15). Kim became responsible for her own life to a greater degree and Georgia was able to let her move on to the neighbourhood school with confidence. "I didn't feel that concerned at all 'cause...they can handle themselves and express what they don't like"(G-II-23). As a subjective learner, Georgia was able to see how the changes her daughters underwent dramatically affected her own life and the decisions she

made. Being connected had two ends, the parent affected the child as the child affected the parent. Georgia was learning about her place in the dance.

The feeling "kind of disappointed when the kids got beyond that age [five]" (G-II-5) was resolved in the classroom with all the different ages. "You could really see the sort of mellowing into their aging process...it wasn't choppy, it was just kids sort of merging" (G-II-7). One age was not a line drawn on the floor and no boisterous six-year-old was allowed back into the world of being a wondrous five-year-old. The children blended according to their interests and their moods. "Sometimes a kid was Kindergarten and sometimes he was Grade 4 depending on the activity and depending on what he enjoyed...it was just like a flowing system" (G-II-7). Although she could see that each age brought with it its own special emphasis and interests, Georgia was able to recognize the flow and the continuity that was larger and more whole than the narrow structures of age by numbers, "seven, eight, nine". She came to realize something more encompassing. "I was not looking forward to the next stage cause it was very unknown. And now--I don't have that same feeling for the teenage or early teenage years. I don't know why" (G-II-32,33). Even though she was not able to articulate what the process was, Georgia was sure of her own feelings around what was ahead for her as a parent. The worry was lifted in some way that she could not express.

Controlling children was what she had been doing for years as she raised her own babies and worked with other people's very young children. "I had been more comfortable in an adult controlled world" (G-I-9). That made sense with pre-school children, but the moment her oldest daughter left home to go out into the world, that adult control was called into question. "I saw a lot of negatives when teachers controlled behaviour...it's controlled in certain situations and then...later there's no adult and no teacher present, then the kids just really don't know how to deal with it" (G-I-26). What Georgia wanted for Kim was for her to be able to handle problems on her own, not for a teacher to be there to rescue her all the time. By learning to work it out Kim "gained a lot of confidence" (G-II-26) and that was what Georgia had been looking for. To see it working confirmed her new theories. "I think it always amazed me every time I walked in there to see how successful it was--I could see the growth in them" (G-I-28).

Summary

All three women expressed an awareness of the changes they had undergone at the particular time in their lives when they were involved in the Alternative Class. They left the class having grown more confident and sure of themselves and having grown more sure of their relationships with their children. Jo and Georgia felt that their growth was at

least partially due to their involvement in the class. Ethel seemed to relate her involvement in the class to part of a larger, deliberate effort to deal with her depression. Yet for all three of them the class was a way of dealing with issues from their past experiences of school and childhood and their present experience of being mothers. Their personal growth came about by resolving those issues to some degree and by having a place where they could experiment with new ways of relating.

Chapter 4

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The first nine themes examined the structures of the class which were presented by the women in the study as enabling them to make personal changes in their lives. These nine themes were an analysis of the class relevant to the women. "More Active/Less Traditional" spoke of their need for something different from the traditional classroom and how the Alternative Class did differ. "Without Realizing You're Doing It" looked at the way events satisfied needs after the women had been involved for some time. "Connectedness" examined the importance of making connections with others to facilitate growth. "Being There For Your Own And Others' Children" told of how each woman was willing to take responsibility for caring for children in the class and how that brought about a climate for growth. "Ownership By Parents" examined the structures of the class that provided parents with decision making power. "Community" explored the two communities within the class, the community of the children and the community of the parents, and how they provided support for personal growth. "The Teacher Assistant Role" looked at how parents were involved in the daily

operations of the classroom and how that affected the women in the study. "If It Doesn't Work" gave two of the women permission to take risks--because they could always walk away.

The tenth and eleventh themes, "Affirmation" and "Change", examined what personal changes occurred as a result of the structures previously mentioned. "Affirmation" expressed the power of the class to promote change and told how the class empowered the women. "Change" specified, with examples, personal changes the three women described in their interviews.

All three women were at critical phases in their lives. They felt they had been missing something. They were looking for a way to move through changes that they felt were upon them. Organizational structures in the Alternative Class allowed them to have the experiences they needed to accomplish their transitions. These structures were not available to them in the traditional school setting.

Communication in it's various dimensions was the means by which connectedness was achieved and personal growth took place. The women were part of their children's lives at school. The larger issue for these women was one of trust, trusting someone else to support their children, trusting their children to be able to handle their own crises, and trusting themselves as capable mothers with knowledge. Each woman used her involvement in the class to gain some

understanding of her own situation. Each of them looked to others in the community of the Alternative Class. The community permitted them to redefine their roles in the world and supported them as they did so. It also offered a tool for furthering their understanding of each other and the children in the class. The interviews provided a process for reviewing and synthesizing the many experiences of being a member of the Alternative Class. In the interviews, the women communicated a deep awareness of the changes that they had undergone during their participation in the class. They expressed that awareness in terms of greater self-confidence and a surer relationship with their children.

Involvement in the Alternative Class enlarged these women's view of education. Each developed a role for herself in the class, a role which fit with her vision of what school should be like for her children. All three women believed that they influenced how things happened in the classroom. In the end, they were able to leave their children in school. This trust was gained by becoming aware of their own power and voice inside the system. They became woman who had worked on the inside as volunteers. They had watched different children progress over the months and years. They had been involved in teaching. They had been a part of making curriculum decisions. Personal choice and personal power went hand in hand with confidence in themselves and in their children.

All three of the women interviewed expressed a need to make contact with people of like mind. While they were experimenting with fundamental changes in themselves and in their relationships they looked to others in the community for support. New connections were created as their web of care and responsibility expanded. In the process of becoming accepted by the other parents, each woman became more accepting of herself and of her proficiency as a person having knowledge. Acceptance and encouragement by respected others gave permission for change to take place. Self-respect was developed as respect was accepted from others and as each woman began to feel needed in the class. Hence "Connectedness" and "Communication" were two critical themes that explained how personal growth developed. Three events were taking place simultaneously. The first was the acceptance of self as being capable and knowledgable which came about as they saw themselves respected in the larger context of the class. The second was the enlargement of the web of relationships which signalled a willingness to take greater responsibility for others as each woman's confidence grew. And thirdly, each was wrestling with her way of knowing what she knew, the metacognitive process.

Belenky et al. (1986) propose four ways of knowing for women in their developmental model. Received knowledge is knowledge received from others in authority. Subjective knowledge is that knowledge which we know from ourselves, our

feeling of being right. Procedural knowledge is knowing the other in terms of oneself or in terms of ones's view of oneself. And finally, constructed knowledge which integrates knoledge gained from oneself with that which is learned from the outside world. The women in this study demonstrated incidences of all four positions in their interviews.

As we got further into the interviews and the analysis of them, it became obvious that the participants could recall the experiences of being immersed in the class but no longer felt the need to be as involved with their children's lives. The community of the class had provided affirmation of their choices and, with some regrets, the women moved on to other things. They had spoken on behalf of their children when they felt the need was greatest. They had taken responsibility for their own children and other people's children as well. They had met with and been accepted by people from all walks of life who appreciated their contributions. They had risked doing something different and had been confirmed in the rightness of their decision. Their knowing of that rightness came from a personal sense of themselves, not from an external judgement provided by professionals. The changes they had experimented with became part of their world view. By involving themselves in the education of their children these mothers aligned their way of life, their doing in the world, more closely with their

belief systems and in the process resolved their personal crisises. While they had entered hesitantly, they left believing in themselves more fully as women with voices and power, able to care for their children and themselves.

Implications

This work has implications on two levels, educational research and educational practice. The bulk of research on volunteerism in schools has surveyed the volunteer's influence on students. By examining the parent volunteer's perspective and using a research approach which was ethnographic and narrative this study revealed a deep, reciprocal relationship between school and parents in the Alternative Class. The study found the growth and change of the women paralleled the growth and change of their children. At some point, the women felt they were no longer in need of the special situation that the class offered and withdrew their involvement or withdrew their children. The implication, made available through the ethnographic approach, is that volunteers will stay within an institution only so long as the institution fulfils a need felt by the volunteers.

Feminist oriented literature provided essential material when dealing with women in their relationships with their children, other adults, and institutions, particularly

education. This was crucial when describing the women's moral and ethical stances. It was only in women's studies of women that such research was available.

In terms of educational practice, the innovations present in the Alternative Class allowed for complex relationships to develop which encouraged subsequent personal growth in the parents involved. For each of the women in the study there were significant personal changes paralleling those found by Gilligan (1982) among young women attending university and by Belenky, et al. (1986) among women from family agencies that provided assistance with parenting. Personal growth among the participants in this study was promoted by being involved in their children's education. Rather than keeping parents at arm's length as had been done in the past, the Alternative Class openly encouraged parents to enter into a joint partnership at the most fundamental levels of education. Although it was a slow and painful process, sharing the responsibility for education with the community of parents opened the door to change and innovation for both the school and the parents. Participation in the class allowed for different and divergent needs to be met by the women. The participants revealed that their volunteering had the power to help them with a variety of requirements that led to personal growth.

Joint partnership, of which Jane Atkin (1988) spoke, implied mutual respect between the institution and the

parent, each valuing the other. Mutual respect was achieved in the Alternative Class when parents were welcomed into the classroom and given opportunities to develop deep relationships with the members of the school community. Those relationships became the means for changing both the lives of the parents and the perceived purposes of the institution. For parents, their children's classroom became a personal part of their own lives to which they were willing to commit a great deal of time and effort improving the quality of the institution.

Parent volunteers are part of the landscape of schools. Although present in many situations, for the most part, they have gone unnoticed when viewed against the larger presence of students, teachers and administrators. It is time to examine the attitudes of educators towards parents in the school setting. The Canadian population is undergoing an ethnic shift as new nationalities and cultures immigrate to our country. If the schools are to understand the children of these immigrant families then they will have to turn to the immigrant parents who have intimate knowledge of their own culture. We are seeing demands for community input among native groups who are leading the way in community involvement in their schools. Parent volunteers are a valuable resource to schools faced with reduced budgets and reduced staff. The relationship between the school and parents has not been fully explored until all the voices have

been heard. If schools are to benefit from the talents and energy of the communities they serves it is imperative that the voices of parents be heard and understood in their own context.

Concluding Remarks

I returned to the Alternative Class after working a year in a mainstream classroom and writing the bulk of this thesis. I left because I felt I had to re-establish my perspective by removing myself from the class. I returned because I realized how important the work I had been doing in the class was to me. At present, the parents are hoping to grow into a second class, Grades 4, 5 and 6.

I see the role of parents expanding in education. The parent-school alliance is the most direct means of achieving necessary changes in the school system. It is the way of the near future as we struggle with a plunging economy and subsequent budget cuts. There is a trade-off between finely tuned curriculum and non-professional educators in the classroom, of course, but the payoff is benefit to students parents and the schools. Ultimately, the survival of the Alternative Class is not the issue. The issue is what everyone from the parents to the Director of Education for our county learned from the experience.

For the children of those parents who are involved in my

class, school is part of their family life. School is not a place "out there" where they live an existence separate from the family, it actively involves their family. School is discussed at the supper table as a mutual experience. The family extends into the classroom. School becomes something with intrinsic worth and credibility.

In writing this thesis I was awed by the wisdom of the three women involved in the study. I took time to ask myself what was so special about what we were doing in the Alternative Class and, I considered what the women were saying to me. What I heard was that the parents want to be involved and to feel useful. I have learned to listen to parents. I have learned that providing strategies for parents to participate in the education of their children is sound pedagogy and I have become committed to that goal in my professional life.

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Appendix

Exerpt From Georgia, Interview II

A: I'm going to maybe run forty-five minutes and then start to wind it down.

G: Okay.

A: Okay? So what would that be? That would be about ten thirty um--checking in--okay. The tape should go off about then. Okay--um. You, mentioned that you feel --let me--let me just start a little easier. How did you feel about the interview that we did last time?

G: Well it was kind of fun cause it brought back a lot of memories..um--I do think about the class in stages and I think the kids do as well, we talk about different things. Because the three of us were in the class I think it was a family kind of thing that we did together so if one person remembers something the other two were probably a part of it.

A: Uh-huh.

G: For the most part--or even if we weren't actually right there when it happened we were so familiar with the class that it um--it felt like we knew exactly whatever the person was trying to talk about in terms of past events or people or um--so it was kind of good to talk about it cause it just--it brought back a lot of thoughts. It's probably going to be something--because we were there for three years it's going

to be something that had a larger impact on my life and the kids' lives than other events will because there was the consistency of having you there for three years and then a lot of the same children for three years, or families, so--um, and we just did a lot of unique things that were more physical and hands on so you tend to remember those activities longer.

A: So there was a sameness to the experience but there was also--you all three had the same experience.

G: Yah--and more a sameness to--the experiences didn't often repeat themselves and if they did they were just tended to happen in different ways even though we had the same activities or some of the same activities year after year they just--with different types of--with the kids getting older I guess we, they just reacted differently. But there was just a sameness for the three years and a just a--being comfortable with the whole situation was--its just--its like the times when you remember camp or some of those activities, they were just some of the better times in your life so I'm, I'm sure the kids are going to--recurring times they're going to bring things up--and they do, as I said they seem to just, we'll be driving somewhere and they'll remember an activity or a person or an event and then it'll create a discussion for a while. And it's kind of neat.

A: So you use it that way? You use the remembrances to create the discussion?

G: Well we do, because it's almost natural. If someone says, "Remember when we did this?", then the others sort of jump in. Sally brings something up. Then Kim and I will remember--we'll have our own rememberings which may be slightly different of the events so there tends to be just a natural discussion around it. Yah. And it often--if we do talk about the class for one thing it often, before we finished sort of what ever we're talking about one or two more events will come up because it will sort of trigger another couple of events. It doesn't happen weekly, but I would say it probably happens every couple of weeks there's some reference or something will happen that reminds them of being in the class and, uh--usually in the car or eating--or we're usually together and it comes up--so--.yah it, it was fun, it brought back a lot of a lot of memories about it.

A: Um. So is there a sense of--of--of it being over? Is there a sense of an ending having happened?

G: Well, I thought there would be more of a sense of ending--as we came to June when it was going to end and I found that some of the things that I learned in the way I dealt with the kids or activities have just carried on so its more --it's just been another sort of as I was telling you earlier like a foundation. So it didn't end. It's like something--because there are memories and because we have a lot of pictures of the class, and we do look at the photo albums fairly often--um--it's..I don't necessarily thing I would want to go back

you know? It's something that was really good and, and it was a good three years. I wish Sally had had more time, because she just had the one year. She helped out the one year with me--but she--I wish she'd had one more year--um--but we've sort of moved on to different into different areas and they've coped very well and so we're just in a different phase it seems like, but I don't feel like it ended, I just felt like it was a period that, particularly Kim, but also myself and Kim and Sally, we did something that was just solid for three years, and now we're building upon it. And things are changing a little more rapidly and that was kind of a holding time--and it was--it's my most favourite time is the younger time, the younger ages anyway so it's a time I really remember with the kids and I think now that Kim's going to be nine I find that they're aging faster and faster. So they aged quickly over those three years but it was because I was more involved in the classroom and because the events were more--there was more to the events--they didn't just happen, there was some building up to an activity. There was the planning before, there was the activity and then there was the sort of evaluation afterwards of it, or the discussions afterwards--um--I just feel that it was like a whole, it made those three years kind of long and good years and--and--um--it's just--I just feel now that the years are going more quickly--like this year went really quickly for me--um--and the kids are getting to the point where

they're not as involved--or not wanting to be as involved with Bob or I, so I find that, you know, their friends are more important to them now they're wanting to be off doing things--so the times when they sort of wanting to spend a lot of time with me, they were really good events happening--that kind of thing.

VITA

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